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Best Detective Stories

OF THE YEAR

Best Detective Stories
OF THE YEAR

EDITED BY

DAVID C. COOKE

E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY, INC.,
NEW YORK · 1946

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FIRST EDITION

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Introduction

A SHORT, INCOMPLETE HISTORY

As a vehicle of popular fiction, the detective story rates among the most recent forms of entertainment for the masses seeking "escape" from the humdrum reality of regimented life. Its "invention," processing, and marketing are generally attributed to the immortal Edgar Allan Poe, whose wayward genius produced C. Auguste Dupin and "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" in 1841. But while it is true that Poe laid down the fundamental precepts upon which every modern detective-story writer works, his "invention" was merely an adaptation of a form of fiction and story-telling as old as the history of civilization. Oriental, Latin, Greek, and Jewish literature are well peppered with stories of deduction and analysis in the wake of criminal actions, and many classic works have been drawn from these sources. Historians of the detective story assert that these early works of fiction are not pure *detective* stories, but by the same token, fully nine-tenths of the so-called "detective" stories of today are not, by iron-clad rules, actual detective stories, and in many of these the art and science of detection and analysis do not even enter into the picture. Still, they are roughly classified under the general heading of "detective" stories.

One of the most famous of the ancient stories is "Susanna and the Elders," from the Apocryphal Scriptures, which concerns the analysis of testimony in order to exculpate Susanna, who had been falsely condemned of carnal cohabitation with a nonexistent lover. "Bel and the Dragon," also from the Scriptures, is one of the first instances of actual detection in which a puzzle is solved by means

of an ingenious device of the "detective." The story is complete with many of the devices of current works, even to a locked and sealed room in which the crime was perpetrated. And this was written many centuries before the first official police force was created in 1829!

Other ancient, albeit true, examples of detection and analysis are found in *Æsop's Fables*, and even the children's story of "Rumpelstiltskin" is a riddle story in which detection is a necessary element.

Probably the oldest of all crime stories is "The Clever Thief." Both the name of the original author and the country of its origin are unknown. It is recorded in an ancient Buddhist book that goes back nearly a thousand years. But even in those primitive days it was not new, for it had been carried by word of mouth from one end of the then known world to the other, told with different settings and different characters—but with the same crime and identical solution. The story is at least twenty-five centuries old, and probably even older than that.

As old as "The Clever Thief" may be, in its general theme it is as new as the latest Ellery Queen or Craig Rice. Everything in the modern sense is found in the story: the cutting off of the victim's head to preclude identification of the corpse, the elaborate trap set up to apprehend the criminal—and his method of escaping and, momentarily, outwitting his pursuers. What more could be asked of any crime story, whether it be called "detective" or not?

With this background, one would have expected the detective story to flourish and blossom into one of the most fragrant and acceptable forms of literature. The reverse, however, is more generally true. For some unfathomable reason, the detective story is looked upon with a jaundiced eye by many present-day readers; and how often do you see a work of detective fiction in the best-seller list? Edmund Wilson, the eminent critic of *The New Yorker*, within recent months editorialized that detective books were "dull," "ill-written," and "boring," and he even went so far as to conclude that paper should not be wasted on publishing "this rubbish." Notwithstanding, many of the ablest authors have at some time found this field so fascinating as to turn their whole attention to it. Among

those who so diverted their efforts to this genre are W. Somerset Maugham, Robert Louis Stevenson, Hugh Walpole, Irvin S. Cobb, Ben Hecht, and James Hilton. But while the last-named author was obviously intrigued with the challenge of the detective story itself, his "Was It Murder?" was published under the pseudonym of Glen Trevor, apparently because his publishers did not wish his large audience to associate his name with anything considered as low-brow as the detective story.

It is readily discernible, therefore, that the league of mystery writers is not composed, as many seem to believe, of the "rubble" of the Fourth Estate. They are able writers all—more competent than the majority of their contemporaries contributing material to other fields, as a matter of fact. They can *never* let their stories ramble on without benefit of a definite beginning, middle, and end, as do others in the higher-paid brackets, and even the smallest slip of the pen is often sufficient to cause one of two calamities to fall upon them, each equally disastrous: the editorial axe on their vulnerable necks, or the unmitigated wrath of the reader who feels that he has been cheated.

It must be remembered that the *purest* form of detective fiction is the short story and not the novel. The short story itself is unblemished by blind alleys or sub-plots. It is usually a straight-line story from the first word to the last, and virtually every word in between is carefully chosen to do one of two things: to build up the riddle or mystery, or to offer a conclusion. The detective novel, on the other hand, is, more often than not, a "padded" or blown-up short story, with detailed characterization and description, and so-called red herrings thrown in to draw it out to the necessary length.

A strange paradox is the almost universal acceptance of the short detective story over the radio. A glance at the day's programs discloses many very popular shows of this type, all of which are presented in thirty minutes or less time—much less when advertising, music, and other pauses are considered. *Mr. District Attorney*, *Suspense*, *The Inner Sanctum*, *Mr. and Mrs. North*, *The Falcon*, *The Shadow*, and a score or more of others are presented weekly for the adult audience; and certainly the juvenile *Superman*, *Cap-*

tain Midnight, and *The Lone Ranger* cannot be classified as anything but detective stories, regardless of the setting or physical capabilities of the characters.

CONSIDERING THIS VOLUME

To be truthful, the title of this book is misleading. It is presumptuous for *any* editor to sit down and select a group of stories in any category and catalogue them the "best." There is no established yardstick by which to measure the qualities of fiction stories, and every reader fortunately has different tastes. In round figures, some twenty-five hundred stories were read and carefully analyzed before the final selection was made for inclusion in this volume. The entire gamut of detective fiction was explored, from the lowest of the low to the highest of the high. The only medium left untouched was the cloth-bound book, for we are concentrating on putting between covers *only* those stories which have not previously enjoyed book publication.

Still another difficulty with the title is that it tells only half the story. This is a book of *short* stories, selected for ease of reading, so that, even if a story cannot be put down until it has been finished (as so often is the case with a good detective story), the reader will not lose too much sleep. Stories of only fifteen thousand words or less were considered, because of this theory of readability, and the majority are considerably shorter than ten thousand words. They are short, straight-line stories with no padding, no blind alleys, and no unnecessary red herrings. Every word, from beginning to end, is there only to further the continuity of the story itself. The stories all begin at the beginning, get into the action as quickly as possible after a suitable introduction, reach a climax, and end when all the strings have been tied together.

Fiction is always a matter of taste, and stories appealing to one reader do not necessarily please others. To test the contents of this book, we used several friends as guinea pigs, and the results were interesting. Stories called "excellent" by some of these obliging friends were earmarked only "good" by others, and vice versa. So

our endeavors passed the first test without difficulty, and if we have not in fact included all the "best" detective stories of the past year, we have at least chosen many in this category and a few in the "good."

Happy reading!

DAVID C. COOKE

Best Detective Stories

OF THE YEAR

Married to Murder

An intrigue-cum-murder yarn with a sprinkling of belated analysis on the part of Hank Blindloss, this story was spun of the strongest material and tightly woven with dramatic action and suspense. Carole has been painted with such accomplished strokes that she becomes a living person, with the sly cunning of a Delilah. . . . G. T. Fleming-Roberts is an old and experienced hand with the mystery story, although not generally known to the book audience. Fiction pours from his prolific typewriter like water over Niagara, and his stories are always on an exceptionally high level.

HE WAS not yet dead.

He lay there in the all-but-darkness listening to the swift tick of the little French clock on the rose marble mantel and wondered how many seconds it had tolled since the panic-driven footsteps had faded into the night. Prone on the carpet, head turned to the left, his arms and gloved hands extended along the floor, reaching helplessly, he was six feet from the small table on which the phone rested. Behind him somewhere was the knife with its telltale fingerprints. Ten feet? Twelve? He had no way of knowing how far his agonizing, inching crawl had taken him.

He regretted now that his first thought had been the phone. He might have reached the knife or the keycase—Carole's keycase that lay beneath the door edge in the library where Ruffy, the cat, had wedged it in his senseless play. He could hear Ruffy pawing at it now.

The keys, the phone, and the knife—points of a triangle slim

as an arrowhead, and he, Hank Blindloss, lay across it, impaled by it, utterly unable to alter the hideous shape of things. The carpet was soft, but he was impressed only by its flatness. The whole world was flat and tilted inexorably toward the abyss. A faint breeze, lilac-scented from the garden, swept across the floor, and he drank thirstily of it. Beyond the screened French windows were the small sounds of earth in summer, and beyond the garden the sucking swish of traffic in the street. But within the house were only the sounds of his dying, the faint *chink-chink* of Carole's keys when they were flicked by Ruffy's paw, and the hurried tick of the glass-encased clock on the mantel.

He could see the clock in memory. It was like Carole, Hank thought, in the beautiful, delicate intricacy of its mechanism. It was like Carole in its transparency; you could watch the workings of both without understanding the motivation of either. Like her in its insistent chiming in. Especially it was like her in its natural, open-faced deception.

There was not much pain from the knife wound in his back, nor he was numbed to it. Perhaps the mental torment of thinking last thoughts lucidly was counterirritant to physical pain. He was aware of a strange effervescent sensation within his chest, as of a long tall drink filling with a thin stream of soda. Internal bleeding, he thought, and got a certain wry satisfaction from the notion that this killing had not been messy.

The other killing, he reflected, must have been quite messy.

The clock chimed—a quarter to eleven. The hour was not important. Minutes mattered, and their component seconds, but hours were not for Hank Blindloss.

Lying there, vapid in exhaustion, his mind stumbled back along the maze to grope for its beginning. The beginning was Carole's own—the linking of chromosomes that had predestined her blinding beauty and her shallow-rooted, man-sapping existence before her birth. He could know nothing then, at the beginning. But there was at least a point where he could say, "This is where I came in."

That was during the '30's, when Hank Blindloss, a bachelor who worried too much about what was happening to his wholesale drygoods business, had been brought into the hospital with acute stomach ulcers. Young Dr. McKee was the surgeon—slight, nearly bald, and brisk, with sharp blue eyes and long, rock-steady hands. During the days that followed the operation, they had found something in common through Angus McKee's small talk at Hank's bedside. Both enjoyed a good game of chess when they could get it.

"I've tried to teach Carole," McKee had said. "Carole is my wife. . . . She doesn't grasp the finer points, doesn't offer much competition—"

He left that dangling awkwardly as though he had found some unintended note of bravado in it. Actually, he wasn't proud of his chess playing. His one vanity was the steadiness of his hands.

Many times, in the weeks and months that followed, Hank witnessed boyish demonstrations of those steady hands—Angus moving the chess table nearer the fire without toppling a single piece, carrying tall Pilsner glasses brimming with beer, passing Hank and Carole the salted nuts piled high in a shallow silver dish.

"Darling, you've got nerves of iron!" Carole would exclaim.

Strange and terrible that it was Angus' hands that finally betrayed him. . . .

Hank remembered the first chess game at the McKee apartment, his first meeting with Carole. She had worn ice-blue satin that fitted her perfect figure close at the bosom and waist, then fell away in frosty folds to the floor. He had thought her tall and cool and unapproachable. Less than an hour later he was annoyed at himself that he was wrong about her. She was none of those things, not even tall.

She curled, kittenlike, on a low chair apart from the chess game, silent for a time, an innocent pout on her full red lips. Then she came rustling to the table to hang over Angus' chair, pretending interest in the game. Her husband's pipe was out

and she scuffed a match for it. In the flame, flecks of violet sprang into prominence in her gray-green eyes. Wonderful eyes, Hank thought, with the clear white showing all around.

And then she was chiming in. "Look, Angus-pet, move your lighthouse over there and your horse *here*." Then her childish "Oohl" of dismay. "That wouldn't do. You'd be chucked."

"The lighthouse is a rook," Angus had explained with sober patience. "The horse is the knight. And it's checked—not chucked."

Carole laughed. "Next time I'll help Mr. Blindloss. That'll make things even."

She "helped" Hank later but was so damned disconcerting with her loveliness that he almost fell into a trap Angus had set for him. He told himself this was nothing. He wasn't a ladies' man. He fussed easily. He hadn't realized then that already Carole had got some frail root into him, under his skin, seeking his bloodstream.

That game, like many others that followed on subsequent nights, was never finished. The phone and the oath of Hippocrates saw to that. Angus McKee turned, his hand still resting on the cradled phone, his blue eyes straying regretfully toward the chessboard and the cheerful fire. He smiled slightly.

"Old Mrs. DeGraff," he said. "Her daughter insists it's an emergency. Probably she's been eating fried potatoes again. . . . You don't mind waiting, Blindloss? It's only ten blocks from here. Won't take long for me to quiet her down."

Hank had looked at the clock—the same glass-encased French clock. Ten-thirty.

"But that's fast," Carole had chimed in, following Hank's glance. "Isn't it, Angus—fast in cold weather?"

"It's wrong," Angus grunted. "That's the only thing you can count on with that clock. It's always wrong. . . . You'll wait, won't you, Blindloss? I'll be back in three-quarters of an hour."

Hank had agreed promptly. Carole had said, "Of course!" and clapped her hands. "There's brandy, Angus, for when you come back, and we'll have some little cakes and things. . . .

You see, Mr. Blindloss, I have to bribe him with food or he'd go off some night to see some wealthy old dowager and *never* come back." And from another room where he was putting something into his satchel, Angus McKee said, "That's a lie!" and laughed. He came out with his bag, his hat and topcoat, and immediately Carole was prettily concerned for him.

"Your *heavy* coat, darling! Don't you know it's winter? Who'll doctor the doctor when he gets pneumonia?" She had yanked the topcoat from his arm, had taken it into the next room to change for a greatcoat.

"She takes good care of you, Doctor," Hank had said.

"She does, for a fact." Smiling, Angus watched for Carole's return. She came in lugging his heavy coat in front of her at arms' length, purposely stumbled over the tail of it. They laughed because that was the unexpected; her movements were always quick and graceful.

Angus had left. He possessed a doctor's penchant for underestimating time. An hour passed, two hours. Hank and Carole had sampled the brandy several times, agreed that it was good, though Carole unexpectedly professed a preference for strawberry ice cream. They laughed a good deal and talked. Carole drew Hank out of his shell, asked questions about his work. He found himself glamorizing the wholesale drygoods business and pulled up short.

Angus returned at one A.M., stoop-shouldered and worn out. There was no time left for the chess game.

"But we'll try it again," Angus said heartily as Hank left. "It was fun while it lasted. Good for Carole, too. She spends too much time alone."

"Yes, be sure and come again," Carole added. "I think you and Angus are good for each other. You have so much in common."

But they never had anything in common, really, except Carole. . . .

Hank had thought on his way home that it would be wonderful having a wife like Carole. And he meant, *like* Carole.

He never meant anything else during all those other pleasant evenings at the McKee apartment. He even meant *like* Carole when he and Carole were meeting regularly downtown for lunch, for cocktails, for dinner. Full realization of what he was doing came as a complete shock, and simultaneous with the certain knowledge that there was no one *like* Carole.

A great black-browed plodding man, with plodding, exact thought processes, Hank Blindloss knew it had to end. It had to end not next month, not tomorrow, but right now. He held her hand across the dimly lighted table at René's that afternoon and told her.

"We're seeing too much of each other and it isn't something you cure by tapering off. It has to be the iron cure, as with any other habit."

"But, Hank—" The protest was as eloquent unfinished. She tried astonishment then, with parted lips and wide eyes. Yet she must have known what she was doing to him; what she wanted to do to him.

"Don't be silly, Hank!" Sophistication replaced childlike wonder. "You're positively puritan. Angus is broadminded. He must know how lonely my life is. He trusts us—"

"Without reason," he cut in dryly.

"But Angus likes you. You *can't* just break off, Hank!"

Smiling, he looked down at the hand he was holding, at the fine bones of it. He lifted it, gave it a prim shake, and let it go.

"Like that," he said. "In another moment I'll help you with your coat. We'll walk out of here, my hand on your elbow. I'll find you a cab, help you in. I'll tip my hat and you'll smile. It will be good-bye, Carole, and good-bye, Hank. Like that."

"Like that?" She raised one slim brow and a corner of her mouth. She drew a tremulous breath. "All right, Hank," she murmured.

But it wasn't like that, and it wasn't all right. In the entryway of René's, with the rosy lights behind them and dusk on the street ahead, she turned suddenly, fiercely, upon him, drew

his arms about her, clung to him, reaching upward to crush her mouth to his.

She was in him then with all of her frail root fibers. There was no escape.

Hank saw neither of the McKees for ten months. He told himself that he had forgotten Carole. Then one evening the phone in his apartment rang.

"Hank, you've got to come over!" Carole's voice was a frantic whisper from the receiver. "For Angus. He lost a patient this morning. An operation."

Hank didn't understand. Angus must have lost patients before this.

"No, no," Carole hurried on. "He *did* something. Or it was something he didn't do. And it was the Carter boy. You know what the Carters can do, with their money and position and influence. You've *got* to come and see if you can pull him out of this, Hank. He's a *wreck*. Please, Hank, please."

"Wel-l-l," he half assented, conscious of the sudden throb of his pulse. "All right. Half an hour."

Carole met him in the apartment vestibule. He knew then that none of his thoughts of her during the past ten months had flattered her or had done her justice. Her hair was neither gold nor copper but a glowing combination of both, and fine as spun glass. She held his two hands briefly, her smile small, her eyes half closed and tender.

"Where's Angus?" Quick suspicion made him brusque.

"In there." She pointed back over her shoulder, whispered, "Hank, I'm afraid for him. He's—"

Hank broke away, walked into the living room. Angus was seated in a chair, his hands gripping the arms of it, knuckles blanched white. His small blue eyes were haggard, sunken in shadows, their keen edge dulled.

"Hi, fella," he said to Hank, without smiling. He stood up with an effort, and his hand was clammy. "You can't do this to us, Hank. Where've you been?"

And before Hank could answer, Carole chimed in with, "I should say not. You've been neglecting us terribly."

Hank said he had been busy, which was true enough. He had kept himself busy trying to forget Carole—not that it had accomplished anything. He could scarcely keep his eyes off her now as she darted about, with the quick grace of a dragonfly, setting up the table and board for chess.

"I'll bring in some beer. . . . No, Angus, sit still. And, Hank, you pull up a chair. I'll sit over in my corner and knit. You didn't know, Hank, I've improved my shining hours by learning to knit." False gaiety, her voice ringing high like the chime of the clock.

"Yes, she's learned to knit. Isn't that fine, Hank?" This from Angus. His lips spread thin in silence afterward and Carole gave him a look—a strange, startled look—before she ran out into the kitchen. Angus, straightening the row of black pawns, knocked over three of them. He stared dully at the rolling pieces, then sank back into the chair, his haggard eyes reaching across the table for Hank.

"Hank, I killed that boy this morning," he said hoarsely.

Hank shook his head. "Nonsense. You were doing your best for him."

Angus didn't seem to hear. "I've performed the same operation a hundred times or more. The boy had every chance to live. But my damned hands weren't steady. I couldn't get out of myself—"

He broke off as Carole entered with tall Pilsner glasses and bottles on a tray. They didn't talk any more about the Carter boy's death, but some time later, when Hank and Carole came in from the kitchen with more beer, they found Angus bowed forward in his chair, his face covered with his hands. They kept to the doorway, staring at Angus. They heard him muttering behind his hands. Carole's fingers closed tightly on Hank's shoulder, drew him back into the kitchen, and she quietly closed the door. Turning to Hank, her eyes were bright with fear.

"Did you hear that?" she whispered.

Hank nodded. His mouth felt dry and cottony. He stepped back to the sink for a drink of water.

"What does he mean by 'he killed him,' Hank?"

"He"? I thought he was saying, 'She killed him.' " He put the glass of water down, untasted.

"No, no," she denied hurriedly. "It was 'he,' I'm sure. How could it be 'she'? One of the nurses, you think?"

He didn't know. He didn't think about it much, because suddenly Angus seemed remote from them, almost as though he didn't exist at all, and there were only Hank and Carole. As though Angus were dead. She must have sensed as much. Avoiding him deftly, she picked up a bag of potato chips and crinkled the cellophane wrapping in her hands.

"Listen, Hank, this is the way they make the sound of a fire over the radio. Doesn't it sound like brush burning? . . . Angus, listen—" Laughing, she broke into the living room, rattling the bag. Forewarned of their coming, Angus had a chance to put on his mask. He was pretty much the same old Angus for the rest of the evening. Only the trembling of his fingers as he moved the chess pieces betrayed him.

It was one-thirty when Hank left, and that was the last time he saw Angus McKee alive. That night, Angus took a lethal dose of morphine and slept on endlessly. The note he penned hurriedly before retiring gave instructions for his burial, and nothing else.

Neither Angus nor Carole had any relatives. There were only Hank and Carole in the car behind the hearse. Carole, appropriately pale, wore black. The veil on her chic little hat lent a misty, unearthly quality to her beauty, setting her apart. . . . But she hadn't cried. Hank had watched closely, and he knew she hadn't cried.

"Is it wrong that I can't cry?" she whispered anxiously on the way back from the cemetery. "I've tried, Hank, and I can't. I simply *can't*."

"No," he answered, thinking: *Because she never really loved Angus. She was meant for me—me alone!*

Her small hand gripped his large one, her nails hurting him. "Hank, you're sweet," she murmured. "So comfortable, like old shoes."

It was like that—Carole the widow, already the bride. In his wanting her, Hank forgot to ask if she knew what had happened to Angus' steady hands that they had killed the Carter boy. Perhaps the answer was already in Hank's mind, in some dark cavern where he was afraid to venture. . . .

Now he knew, as he lay there bleeding, listening to the swift tick of the little French clock. Like Carole, the clock—like the swift, strong beat of her heart in the night. It was almost as though she were there, lying beside him.

There was no escape, even now. . . .

They had married eight months after Angus' funeral. Carole was incredibly wonderful, a child-woman on whom he lavished presents for the selfish pleasure of watching her wide-eyed anticipation, her ecstatic delight. He brought her brown diamond ear clips from New York, but she was no less volatile in her appreciation of a quart of strawberry ice cream from the corner drugstore. . . .

"Ice cream, Hank, you angel! *Pink* ice cream. I positively *adore* pink ice cream. You darling!"

"I can get that for you wholesale," he had joked once, thinking of Jack Blindloss, his half-brother, who clerked in a drugstore. Jack cropped up in his conversation once in a while, but Hank had never asked him to the apartment to meet Carole. He didn't consider Jack particularly nice people—profligate, dissipated, with a certain dissolute charm that was always involving him in scrapes with women.

Carole seldom went with Hank on his out-of-town business trips. Travel tired her. "Besides, I miss all the excitement of your coming home. And the presents! I simply *adore* being surprised."

Ruffy, the yellow Angora cat, was one of the surprises. A

beautiful, disdainful animal, almost doglike in its attachment to Carole and its mistrust of strangers, Ruffy barely tolerated Hank, but would sit by the hour while Carole fussed with him and decked him with ribbons.

Childlike, innocent, delightful to live with—that was how he thought of Carole those first years of their marriage. Yet her claws were never sheathed by anything except his own reluctance to find them. . . . Eventually, of course, they found him.

The second summer of the war they rented Judge Rawson's country place—a tall, red-brick farmhouse set well back from the highway, with a poplar-shaded lane that led to the white barn at the back. Carole was enchanted with it.

Hank had to go south on business in July. It was a tiring trip, and he finally lopped two days off the end of it to return dog-tired and discouraged at two o'clock on a Tuesday morning. He drove into the lane and back to the barn, got out, stood a moment listening to the night sounds. Above the shrill fiddling of insects he thought he heard the cry of a cat. It came from behind him, from the barn. Ruffy? Impossible. Ruffy never strayed ten feet from his mistress' dainty heels. He started for the house, then stopped. By George, that *was* Ruffy.

He turned, walked back to the barn, opened the door, twisted the light switch. Ruffy's pleading meow came from the loft, from what had been the feed room. The door of the room was closed, the rusty, twisted hook latched through its staple. He removed the hook, pulled open the door, and a somewhat bedraggled Ruffy came out, his blue bow untied, his fur flecked with chaff.

Hank stood for a moment looking into the feed room. There was an empty white saucedish on the floor, some of Ruffy's yellow hairs clinging to the inside of it. Wondering, Hank turned away, left the barn with Ruffy riding his shoulder, and walked slowly to the house. On the back porch, he held onto Ruffy with one hand while his other groped for keys. He got the door unlocked, but it was bolted on the inside. He was on the point of going around to the front of the house when he

heard light switches popping in sequence and the hurried *pat-pat* of Carole's feet as she came to let him in. He put Ruffy down.

She had on a filmy black chiffon nightgown with a black lace bodice, and she stood high on bare toes to smudge his face and mouth with her kisses.

"Darling boy!"—breathlessly. "This is the *nicest* surprise ever—you, two whole days early! . . . Ruffy, stop that, you tickle!" She laughed at Ruffy rubbing on her bare ankles. She gave him a little push with her foot. Hank noticed the twinkling red polish on her toenails. He hated painted toenails and she knew it. But then she hadn't expected him. He held her small, glowing face in both hands and kissed her. She wore lipstick and rouge—no trace of night cream. It was queer—that, and Ruffy shut up in the feed room.

"Where's your suitcase?" She stepped back, looking around him, her eyes bright with anticipation.

"In the car," he told her. "I was so damned tired. It's been a rotten week. Not a thing to buy and about a hundred thousand people trying to buy it. . . . But I brought you a dress, just a little cotton thing."

"A dress!" She clapped her hands. "Please, darling! I just can't wait until morning. Are you too awfully tired to get it?"

"Nope," he said. "I guess not." And he left the kitchen to trudge back to the car. On the return trip he thought he heard a car starting out on the highway, remembered that there had been a light gray roadster parked on the shoulder when he had turned into the lane. Some soldier on a furlough parking with his girl, he had thought. Now, with the slow, cold tide of realization rising about him, he kept thinking of the soldier and his girl.

He carried his suitcase and the dress box back into the house, took the box into the old, high-ceilinged living room to watch her open it.

"Ooh! It's *darling*!" She held the simple white eyelet frock in front of her, her glowing head tilted critically on one side.

"Just what I wanted more than *anything*. It's—" She broke off, noticing Ruffy crouched on the floor in front of the mirror, washing his face.

Hank said, "Ruffy was shut in the feed room. What was the idea?"

She turned slowly, looking at him, her wonderful eyes narrowed slightly. There was a curious, almost defiant, little smile on her lips.

"I was trying to teach Ruffy to catch mice," she said. "I thought if I was going to be a country girl he might as well learn to be a country cat. So I locked him in the feed room this afternoon and must have forgot to let him out again."

"Oh," he said, and thought of the dish that had contained Ruffy's dinner.

She folded the new dress into its box, patted it, smoothed the tissue across it. Then she took a whirling dance step on her toes and landed in his lap.

"My girl," he said, holding her close. "My girl. Aren't you?"

She snuggled. "Always and always." Then after a quiet moment in which she breathed as deep and gently as though asleep, she said, "What if you came home sometime unexpectedly like tonight and found somebody else here? A man." She laughed at her own suggestion. "What do you think you'd do?"

He took a slow breath, audible in his nostrils. "Kill him," he said.

"Of course you would," she whispered. "You'd kill him. Because you love me so." She took hold of the big diamond ring on his finger, turned it back and forth meditatively. "What would you kill him with?" she asked curiously.

He shivered slightly in spite of the heat. "Anything handy, I guess. . . . What kind of talk is this, anyway?"

"Silly talk!" She laughed, sitting bolt upright on his lap. "But then I'm a silly girl. Just my funny way of finding out if you're jealous."

She kissed him passionately. And even then she was plotting his destruction. . . .

It had to be someone he knew, someone he was likely to bring to the house, some business acquaintance of his, perhaps. Otherwise, there was no possible reason for Carole locking Ruffy up in the feed room. Ruffy took his time about making friends. Only those people they entertained regularly ever made friends with Ruffy. So the other man was someone Hank might bring home to dinner some night, and Carole had feared that Ruffy might betray her.

He began bringing home his friends, systematically, one at a time, observing them in Carole's presence, watching Carole. Carole was captivating to all, innocently flirtatious.

He gave it up. Maybe the whole thing was imagination anyway. He'd better just forget about it.

In September they found the sort of house in town they had been looking for—an eight-room, stone-fronted Colonial well back from the street.

"The *dearest* house! Darling, I know we're going to be sinfully happy there.

". . . Or do you think it's sinful to be happy with the whole world on fire? I sometimes do. . . . You know the only teeny thing wrong with it, darling?" The house, she meant; Carole, variable as the wind, was sometimes hard to follow. "There's no soft water. I've got used to the soft well water at the Judge's place, and I just can't drink this nasty hard stuff, much less *bathe* in it."

He told her they could get soft-water service. "They attach a zeolite cylinder in the hot-water line and then call twice a month to replace the cylinder with one that has been regenerated."

She was wide-eyed about that. "Why, isn't that wonderful!" Then, soberly mocking him: "But won't you worry with a man bringing in the soft-water dingus every two weeks? I'm such a flirt, you know."

They both broke out laughing, Hank suddenly and completely relieved. Lovely, captivating Carole—she was all his.

What a crazy, jealous fool he'd been. What a nasty suspicious mind he had. . . .

He lay there in the dark, and it seemed that the tick of the clock had quickened. The flat earth tilted and he clung to it. There was an odd sensation in his hands as of sand running through his fingers. He thought it was the nap of the carpet, and then remembered that he still wore gloves. The tingling, then, was the blood-starved cells of his fingers. This was death—crawling, amoeboid, embracing.

Ruffy was back at the library door once more, clawing at Carole's keys, scratching the bottom of the door. *Chink-chink* from the keys, then something else metallic that clattered to the floor.

He thought, *My God, it's the knife!*

Ruffy, startled by the sound, came bounding softly into the living room. He uttered a *prrt*, rubbed against Hank's shoulder. Carole was like the cat, as she was like the clock. Carole was everything in the room, and everything was a part of her. Crawling death was a part of her.

Hank struck at the cat, hating Ruffy for his part of Carole. Ruffy yowled and scampered. Hank saw the silhouette of the cat momentarily against the dim night glow from the French windows—Ruffy waltzing sideways like a clumsy colt, as though clumsiness were cute. Like Carole tripping over the tail of Angus McKee's coat, as though clumsiness were cute.

The blow at Ruffy had cost him. He lay quietly now, and breathing hurt. But the hurt was not enough to drive thought from his brain. Not for an instant had he lost consciousness, neither from the blow nor the knife wound. He had a big, husky body that died slowly. And his mind died as slowly. He had to lie there thinking. He had to remember tall, blond Kip Williams, the pawn in the murder gambit. . . .

Hank had run into Kip Williams less than a month ago on his way to his office. Kip was the son in F. H. Williams & Son, a

drygoods house in Nashville, and what he was doing this far north Hank couldn't imagine. Hank approached him, with a broad smile.

"Kip Williams, or I'm a son of a gun!" He put out a hand. "What are you doing in town, Kip?"

Kip's jaw dropped. He slid his lean fingers into Hank's big bluff hand hesitantly, and a thin shadow of apprehension crossed his vapidly handsome face.

"Hank Blindloss! Say, this is your stamping ground, isn't it?" Kip had a husky, wearing voice. "If I had remembered I would have looked you up long ago. How are you? How—how's Mrs. Blindloss?" The pale blue eyes looked away from Hank as though Kip possibly expected to see Carole near by.

Hank chuckled. They were always looking for Carole, these young men. They didn't forget her. Take Kip, for instance. It must have been nearly three years ago that Carole had accompanied Hank on a trip to Nashville, where they had been entertained by the Williams family.

"Carole's fine, fine," Hank said heartily. "Still the prettiest girl in the world. . . . But how long are you going to be in town?"

Again the swift shadow, erased by a sheepish smile. Kip said, "I guess I've taken root here. I tried to get in some branch of the armed forces, but they wouldn't have me. I guess the war made me restless, not being able to do much to help things along. The old man and I had a falling out, and I've been here for two years, with Stern and Higgins, the advertising firm."

Hank said he'd be damned. "But listen, Kip, you've got to come out to the house tonight. Have dinner with us. . . . You're married?"

Kip was shaking his head. "Nope. Not married. And how about a rain check on that dinner, Hank? I've got a hell of a cold."

"Nonsense! I won't take no, Kip. Don't worry about the cold. I have just what the doctor ordered. Dollars to doughnuts you won't know you've got one by midnight."

Those had been strangely prophetic words. . . .

Finally, Kip Williams had accepted. They shook hands again, went off in opposite directions. Hank never knew what prompted that backward glance over his shoulder, but it was just in time to see Williams getting into a car parked at the curb—a gray roadster.

A light gray roadster. A light gray roadster parked at the side of the road near the lane of Judge Rawson's country place. . . . Ruffy shut in the feed room. . . . Carole, with make-up on her face at two A.M. . . . That fleeting shadow of apprehension that crossed Kip Williams' face just now. . . . Kip saying, "I've been here for two years." . . .

He stood there on the sidewalk, watched Kip Williams' light gray roadster pull away from the curb. He shook his head vigorously. No. It couldn't be. There must be thousands of light gray roadsters like that.

He turned, dark eyes squinted against the glare of the June morning, walked on to his office, and telephoned Carole. For a moment after her lilting hello, he couldn't say anything. She said hello again, and he said, "Hank."

"Well, darling! I just kissed you good-bye thirty minutes ago. You want another?"

He forced a laugh. "I just ran into Kip Williams and asked him to dinner tonight. Remember Kip Williams from Nashville?"

Was there a moment's hesitation before she spoke?

"Oh, the man with three chins and a walrus mustache?"

"Hardly," he said, chuckling. "That's Kip's father. This is the young one with the wavy blond hair."

"Ooh, the *handsome* one. . . . Well, goody! I thought they were all in the Army. I'll have my hair done and shoot all our points on a roast. Now hang up, honey, because I'll have to make plans."

She had to make plans. She must have immediately recognized Kip Williams as a means to an end. Carole was nothing if not an opportunist.

Hank brought Carole chocolates that night.

"Candy, darling! Candy and *two* handsome men, all for me! Honestly, Hank, you're too sweet to me. . . . But I just have to *fly* to the kitchen. You call me when Kid Williams comes."

"Kip," he corrected, laughing at her.

"Kid or Kip, dinner will probably be late."

She had no conception of time. But then, Hank thought, time had let her alone. Nine years since he had first met her, and she had not changed.

She greeted Kip Williams no differently than any other male guest Hank had brought to the house. With open, innocent coquetry, she extended both hands to him. Holding his hands, her glowing head tilted to one side, she appraised him, smiling, while he blushed and cleared his throat, and muttered something about having a rotten cold.

"Kip Williams!" she effused. "Of course! How utterly silly of me, Hank. Of course, I remember him. . . . You know, Mr. Williams, I thought my husband said 'Kid Williams.' Like a prize fighter. Wasn't that perfectly idiotic? . . . Run, Hank, and fix highballs."

Her laugh trilled. She drew Kip away toward the living room, still holding one of his hands. Kip's ears were red and transparent.

Hank went out into the kitchen and fixed highballs. Ruffy was out in the kitchen, washing cream off his face with a tongue-damped paw. Hank said, "Out of the way, cat," and started back through the swinging door with the tray and clinking glasses. He was reminded then of Angus McKee's hands, and a strange cold sensation came and went from the pit of his stomach.

Carole and Kip were standing in front of the stone fireplace. Carole was perking the white handkerchief in the breast pocket of Kip Williams' navy-blue double-breasted jacket. He looked like a high-school kid on his first date, Hank thought—red-eared but a little pale in the face, sweat glistening on his

narrow brow, a silly, vapid grin on his face. Hank suddenly felt old and sure and superior.

"Which one is the weak one, darling?" Carole wanted to know. Hank nodded at the weak one, and she took it. Kip Williams took his and said, "Thanks." There was quick desperation in the way he took the first gulp. He said, "Ah! That's the real thing, Hank," and gave his blond head an approving half-shake.

They sat down, and Carole asked Kip Williams how things were in Nashville. He said things were fine in Nashville. Hank explained that Kip didn't live in Nashville any more, that he was working here in town. Kip said yes, he was working here in town.

Something was wrong. Hank could feel the wrongness, was aware of the wall of restraint that Kip Williams had built up. Kip crouched behind the wall and his blue eyes continually strayed to Carole like a faltering actor listening for the prompter's cue. But Carole wasn't throwing out any lines to him. Carole alone was sure of what she was doing.

"The roast!" She sprang to her feet. "I've got to turn the roast."

Kip was automatically on his feet, and as automatically he took a half step as though to follow her, caught himself, glanced at Hank. Hank's smile was slight, bitter. Kip didn't care to be alone with Hank. Kip was afraid of Hank. Kip had a reason, and its name was guilt.

"Sit down, Kip." Hank surprised himself at the ease with which he spoke. He watched Kip sit down as though the chair might possibly be charged with half a million volts.

"How did you happen to break off with the drygoods business?" Hank asked conversationally.

"I—I didn't like it." Kip's eyes slipped from Hank's like quicksilver. "You've got a nice place here," he said.

"Ruffy!" Carole's voice from across the hall in the dining room. "Ruf—fee! You know you don't like company!"

Ruffy trotted across the hall toward the living room, quite

as though he knew what he liked and what he didn't like.

"That's a beautiful cat," Kip said.

"Uh-huh," Hank grunted, watching Ruffy. "Doesn't take up with strangers, though."

Ruffy rubbed against the wood trim of the doorway, trotted a little way into the room, then galloped sideways to Kip Williams' ankles, making pleased purring sounds. Kip sat like a man of stone, lips slightly parted in a sickly smile. Ruffy rubbed on by Kip's ankles, took a turn around the chair, ambled to a position in front of it, and sprang lightly into Kip's lap.

"He likes you," Hank said quietly. He looked away from the cat, away from the paralyzed Kip Williams, and toward the dining room. Carole was standing in the doorway, watching. Her eyes narrow, her smile slight, strange, and secret. She found Hank's dark eyes upon her, and all that was cryptic was driven back behind her lovely, naive mask. She came tripping across the hall and into the living room. Kip, conscious that Hank and Carole were staring at him, patted Ruffy woodenly.

"He—he likes me," he said faintly.

"Isn't that the *strangest* thing!" Carole exclaimed. "Ruffy doesn't make up with *anybody* right away."

"Yes," Hank said, "Ruffy doesn't make up with anybody right away, Kip." He thought then of Angus McKee echoing Carole when she had said that she had used her lonely hours to learn to knit. Hank's acerbity would have matched that of Angus.

Carole said, "What is it they say—if your cat trusts a man, you can too? Or is that for dogs? . . . Anyway, Ruffy certainly trusts you, Kip Williams."

"Yes," Kip said. "Yes, he certainly seems to."

Carole crossed to Kip's chair, picked up Ruffy. Kip moistened dry lips.

Hank thought, *I'd kill him*—his promise to Carole if he ever found there was another man. Well, there *was* another man. Or call him a kid. That was it—Kip was a kid, and Hank middle-aged. Kip must have been younger even than Carole by five or six years. He was just a kid, scared white.

Hank was smiling. It was a tight little smile that he could feel, and the tightness of it ached. He looked at Carole stroking Ruffy. He said, "There isn't any soda for more highballs. Have Kip and I time enough before dinner to walk over to Sixty-third Street?"

"Can't I go?" Kip was suddenly on his feet, his white face eager. "I've got the car out there. Hank, you'll want to help Carole with the dinner—uh, won't you?"

Hank chuckled. "Not at all. You wouldn't guess it to look at her, but Carole's an accomplished cook."

"Aren't I, though?" she chimed in. "Why, yes, you've got at least an hour. It's such a lovely evening. Go on, you and Kip."

"Along the canal," Hank said. "It's beautiful on the old towpath, Kip." *With any weapon he could lay his hands on. And the canal was both handy and deep.*

"The walk will do you good."

"Of course it will," Carole urged. "Walking is wonderful. Go ahead, Kip."

Kip, fumbling at his pockets again, said hoarsely, "Why, sure, I'd like it, Hank. Let's—let's go."

Hank remembered the walk along the towpath with Kip Williams, remembered the calm surface of the deep water. Strangely, his mind had been no less calm. They hadn't talked much. There was nothing to say. Each must have known what was uppermost in the other's mind.

Behind a hedge grown high along somebody's garden, Hank stooped and picked up a rock. It would have been quite easy then—a quick blow with the stone and Kip would have collapsed to roll down the embankment into the dark deep water. No one would have been the wiser. He had looked at Kip, and Kip was staring at the stone. Kip's face was faintly green. Hank smiled slightly, tossed the stone in the general direction of a turtle that had crawled out onto a rock. Kip stumbled, caught his balance and walked on.

A few feet farther on, Kip Williams picked up a stone. He looked down at the edge of the canal, pointed a shaky fore-

finger at nothing. "I—I thought that was another turtle," he explained lamely. But he didn't throw the stone away; he walked with it in his hand.

Just a kid scared white, Hank thought. And Carole was an accomplished woman.

They came to the bridge at College Avenue. Kip let go of the stone sheepishly, let it roll down the bank.

He's thinking I wouldn't kill him here, occurred to Hank. Well, he wouldn't. There were cars moving over the bridge, and Saturday-night shoppers with bags of groceries. *He thinks I'll do it on the way back. It will be dusk then.* He chuckled inwardly as they stepped onto the bridge.

Crossing the intersection at Sixty-third Street, Hank clung to Kip's arm as though Kip were blind. Maybe he was—blind with fear. He wished that there were some way he could tell Kip that he had changed his mind about killing him. He couldn't say, "Look, Kip, you've chased swamp fire into quicksand. It's not your fault." He couldn't say that, because if Kip understood he'd probably turn in the middle of the street and sock Hank on the jaw. Carole was worth fighting over until you knew her.

What he didn't understand was Ruffy's part in all this. Why had Carole permitted Ruffy to betray her when she could so easily have prevented it?

He said abruptly to Kip as they stepped onto the curb, "I can't figure out about Ruffy. Out there at Judge Rawson's place, Carole used to shut Ruffy in the feed room of the barn when she'd have—uh, visitors in my absence."

Kip stopped in his tracks, his back toward the street. His tongue trembled across his dry lip. "I—I don't know what you're talking about."

Hank smiled. "Well, forget—" he began and broke off, his eyes touching the handkerchief in Kip's breast pocket. One of Ruffy's golden hairs clung to the white linen. Hank reached out, flicked the handkerchief from Kip's pocket as Kip turned wildly and dashed out into the street.

"Kip! Wait!" He knew then that Kip had mistaken his move toward the handkerchief for something lethal—a quick thrust of a hidden knife, perhaps. He realized also that it was now too late. These things flashed across his mind even as he called out to Kip, to warn Kip of the danger. There was a shrill scream of rubber on asphalt. One car swerved to avoid Kip, and Kip, dodging blindly, plunged into the path of another. Hank shut his eyes, thought he heard above all other sounds the impact of steel against flesh, heard the tardy squeal of brakes.

He forced himself to look, and then to walk out to the still form lying sprawled in the road. Kip was dead. Hank's first glance told him that. He clenched his hands to stop their trembling. Something crackled faintly, and he realized he was still holding Kip Williams' handkerchief. He looked down at it now and unfolded it. The crackling sound was made by a little bag—a tiny square of cloth, like a sachet bag, its edge sewed by hand. A pungent odor came from the bag. He raised it to his nostrils. . . . Catnip. In a flash, he remembered that Carole had gathered catnip the previous summer out at Judge Rawson's place, and had given some of it to Ruffy every once in a while, all through the winter. . . . "Ruffy's simply *wild* about it. But I suppose that's natural, since he's a cat and that's *catnip*."

Now he understood.

Shaking, he stood up. Mechanically, he moved to the sidewalk. He did not see the men running back from a car parked farther down the street. His one thought was to get away, to be alone with what he now knew was the truth, the terrible truth—that Carole had betrayed Kip Williams because she wanted to!

It was a Judas kiss. All of her seemingly light-hearted questioning of Hank about what he would do to "the other man" had been intentional. She had sent them off this evening—Hank and Kip Williams—thinking that only one would return. And the one who would return would pay with his life for murder. She had meant to be rid of both. She was tired of Kip, more tired of Hank. There would be Hank's money and another man.

He thought there had always been another, even before he had known her. There had been another during those ten months that Hank had kept away from the McKee apartment. He understood now what had happened to Angus McKee's hands. Angus—great-hearted, trusting Angus—had learned of her infidelity. Probably she had contrived that he should learn immediately before the scheduled operation on the Carter boy. Perhaps the Carter boy was the current "other man." He couldn't be sure about that, of course, but her method was clear—pit two of the unwanted against each other, watch brothers of the dragon's teeth destroy themselves.

Kip Williams was dead. The Carter boy, Angus McKee, and now Kip Williams. . . . Well?

He was a plodding man of slow, exact thought processes. . . .

The Carter boy, then Angus, then Kip—and Hank lay dying. How many had gone before, he couldn't know. He only knew that it wouldn't stop with Hank. If there was only some way that he could put an end to it, he might find some of the peace that presumably went with death. If only he could reach the phone. Three words to the police, and he could stop the killing yet to come.

His gloved hands clutched unfeelingly at the carpet, his arms drew on his leaden weight. He moved perhaps an inch up across the seemingly tilted earth, then flattened, exhausted.

There was the tick of the clock, the whisper of leaves in the garden, the occasional swish of a car passing in the street. Somewhere in the dark, Ruffy pussy-footed, alone and unconcerned—just as Carole had been unconcerned the evening she had sent Kip Williams out to die. . . .

She had been eating chocolates. Knowing Carole as he knew her, it was not incredible that she had contrived murder to her satisfaction and then had sat down to eat the chocolates Hank had brought. There was the candy box open on the coffee table,

and later he had found evidence of her sticky fingers on the telephone. She had put the phone down hurriedly as Hank entered, had turned to him, her small face radiant.

"Darling! Where on *earth* have you been? I was just about to call the police or somebody." She ran to him to be taken into his arms.

"Where's Kip?" she wanted to know. "I've waited and waited for you two——"

"Kip's dead," he broke in evenly.

"Dead? Kip? No, Hank! It—it couldn't be!"

He thought she must have practiced that, it sounded so incredulous.

He said, "An accident."

"Accident?" Was there some hint of dismay?

"Yes. At the corner of Sixty-third and College. Something frightened him. He ran out into the street——"

"*Frightened* him? Hank, are you mad?"

"No. On the contrary, I'm probably the sanest man you ever lived with."

Later, when she had gone out of the room, obviously shaken by what had happened—or what had failed to happen—Hank stepped to the telephone, took out his clean handkerchief, pressed it over the dial of the phone. Thus he took an impression of the fingerholes in the dial, was able to note the ones her sticky finger had touched. He wrote down the letters and the figure in each. Maybe when he had tried all possible combinations, he could learn the identity of "the police or somebody" Carole had been about to call.

He sat late into the night with his letters and numbers, twisting them, scrambling them. And of all combinations of which he could conceive, one stood out particularly—HA 5467-3.

It was the number of Jack Blindloss, Hank's half-brother.

Now he could admit to himself why he had never asked Jack to the house. It was not so much because he was ashamed of Jack as because he had not known how Carole would react to

Jack. Jack had a certain dissolute charm, an inexplicable brute fascination.

Black rage gathered within Hank, thinking that now the other man was Jack. He hadn't thought that Jack would sink quite that low, hadn't suspected that Carole could be that cheap.

He must take his time. He must be absolutely sure that this ended the thing, because the job he had to do was not the sort of thing you could try again if once you failed.

His first move was to take Carole to Klinert's Drugstore where Jack Blindloss worked. He managed it casually enough. "Jack saves me cigarettes whenever he gets a chance to slip a few packs under the counter," he explained as they entered the store. His introduction was casual too. "Jack, I don't believe you've ever met Carole, my wife." And Jack's mumbled "Pleased to meetcha" was a dead giveaway. He got his cold blue eyes off Carole as soon as possible, and kept them off. No man could have been that disinterested in Carole.

Carole did much better. "Hank, you've been holding out on me!" she had whispered impishly when they had left the store. "He's positively *fascinating*. That scar on his chin—"

"Acquired falling out of a swing at the tender age of six," Hank interrupted dryly, wondering what wild tale Jack had told her about the scar. . . .

Even after that he took his time. His thoughts moved slowly, with stealth and assurance. He watched the plan grow to perfection. Never a violent man, he thought of what he was doing only as blind justice being led.

He bought the knife in a curiosity shop. It was a beautiful thing of Finnish steel, handle and blade forged in a single piece. He took it to his office in its paper wrapping and there cleaned it carefully. Returning the knife to its wrapper, he put it into his pocket and walked to Klinert's Drugstore, ostensibly to see if Jack had any more cigarettes for him.

"By the way, I've got something here to show you," he said, leaning across the counter. "Something I picked up in a sec-

ondhand store this morning." He brought out the paper-wrapped package, handed it to Jack. "Open it. I'd like your opinion on it."

Jack opened the parcel, emitted a low whistle when he saw the knife. "Whatcha gonna do with that, Hank?" he asked, picking it up to examine it more closely.

"Give it to Carole," Hank said. "For a letter-opener."

Jack gripped the knife and brandished it. He tested the point of it on his palm. "Any letter that gets opened by that shiv goes to the dead-letter office."

Hank laughed and Jack put the knife down into its wrapping paper, handed paper and all to Hank. Hank rolled the paper around it without touching the knife.

He took his time. The hardest part of all was maintaining his attitude toward Carole, playing the part of the trusting husband completely in love with his beautiful wife. He watched ten uneventful days elapse before he made the second move. He simply called Jack Blindloss on the phone and asked Jack to pick up five pounds of arsenate of lead at the drugstore, take it to Jack's flat where he, Hank, would pick it up some evening next week; he was, he said, going to use it as a spray in the garden. He had a small pressure sprayer, and this he carried down to the basement to recondition—or so he told Carole. There had to be some explanation for his tinkering.

But he didn't stop around to Jack's flat to pick up the lead arsenate. Monday of next week brought him a phone call from Memphis; there were new civilian allocations of cotton, and the looms were humming again. He left his office immediately for home to pack his bags.

The first thing he did when he reached Memphis was to buy Carole a present—a string of pearls for which he paid two thousand dollars. He felt a little sad buying it and writing the gift card to slip inside the box: "Carole, with all my love, Hank." He could hear her voice while he wrote: "How *perfectly* sweet, Hank. You darling, darling boy!"

On Friday he received a telegram in his hotel room from

Miss Brand, his secretary: MRS. BLINDLOSS SERIOUSLY ILL. RETURN AT ONCE.

Hank crushed the yellow slip of paper in his big palm, took heavy, plunging steps to the phone. He got the long-distance operator.

"Give me the H.D. Blindloss Company, Indianapolis. Riley 6783-3," he said anxiously. And then he was hanging on, listening to the hum of wires, the precise diction of the operators, the smiling voice of his own switchboard operator: "H.D. Blindloss Company. Good afternoo—un."

"This is Mr. Blindloss. Miss Brand, please."

"Oh, yes. Just a moment, Mr. Blindloss." And then came Miss Brand's anxious, "Yes, Mr. Blindloss."

"I just got your telegram. For God's sake, what's wrong with Carole?"

"An—an accident, I believe. I just came from the hospital—"

"Accident?" he echoed. "You believe? Good Lord, woman, don't you know? What sort of injuries?"

"No, no," Miss Brand said. "Not that kind of an accident, Mr. Blindloss. Some sort of poison."

"Poison!" he cried. "Poison? Carole?"

"The wrong medicine or something like that," Miss Brand told him with difficulty. "I just don't know. Everything is being done that can be done. But you're on your way, aren't you?"

"I'm leaving right away," he said. "I'll try to get a plane. Anyway, I'll get there as soon as possible. Better notify my half-brother, Jack Blindloss, at Klinert's Drugstore. And anything else you can do—well, I'm counting on you, Miss Brand, until I can take over."

She was a faithful person, Miss Brand. When Hank came plunging down the steps from the track elevation at Union Station, he saw her in the throng beyond the gate, hugging her black purse up tight to her narrow bosom.

"Miss Brand! Miss Brand!" He broke through the crowd, swinging his heavy bags, panting a little.

"Miss Brand, is there—" He broke off. It wasn't necessary to ask.

"I'm afraid we have bad news, Mr. Blindloss," Miss Brand said.

"She's dead," he said dully. No need to hurry now. Carole was dead. Mechanically, he picked up his bags, walked slowly into the vast room of the station.

It was Miss Brand who called the cab, Miss Brand who sat beside him and talked when he told her that he wanted to hear all about it now.

"Carole didn't—she didn't—" he began.

"No, it was not suicide, they've decided," Miss Brand said. "There wasn't any note. Mrs. Blindloss was taken ill Thursday night. She managed somehow to get down to the phone and call a doctor. She was rushed to the hospital, but by early morning they had given up hope. They—you see, there were two poisons—lead and arsenate, a compound, I believe, used as an insecticide. It's deadly. Also extremely difficult to trace, since anybody can buy it almost anywhere, so a policeman told me."

"But how—how—"

"They don't know," Miss Brand hurried on, anxious to save him the pain of talking about it. "I gather it was because they couldn't trace a poison like that. There was no evidence that Mrs. Blindloss could have got hold of the stuff in her own home."

"No," he put in. "I'd used it all up."

"So if it was an accident and she got the poison at a party or something like that, why would she be the only one taken ill?"

"It was intentional then," he said, pondering. "Murder. And they've got to trace it."

He went straight to the police, but the information he got from Detective Lieutenant Cruese was but little more than he had already obtained from Miss Brand. That afternoon, the

coroner released the body for burial, and Hank had to make the arrangements with the undertaker.

It was dusk when he finally entered his lonely house. There were only Ruffy and the ticking clock to greet him. He drew the curtains before turning on any lights. He didn't want sympathy.

He went out into the kitchen, found food for Ruffy, then went on into the library. Carole's leather keycase lay on the carpet, but he didn't pick it up. He had a sudden loathing for anything that was Carole's. He went to the bookcase, assured himself that the paper-wrapped package containing the knife was still hidden behind the books.

He left the house at eight-thirty that evening, went out to the garage to get his car. From there he drove over to College Avenue and south for twenty blocks to Klinert's Drugstore. He parked around the corner from the store, merely walked by the front of it to make sure that his half-brother Jack was there.

Returning to the car, he drove four more blocks along the avenue to another drugstore where he purchased a quart of strawberry ice cream. . . . "*Pink* ice cream, Hank! I *adore* pink ice cream!" . . . Once more in the car, he traveled down to Sixteenth Street, parked there, walked up Sixteenth four and a half blocks to Jack Blindloss' flat—three miserable rooms above a grocery store. He went around to the back of the building. There was a skeleton stairway there reaching up to Jack's back door, and Hank climbed it carrying the paper container of ice cream. On the landing at the top of the steps were two bushel baskets heaped with waste paper and refuse.

Hank knelt on the landing, struck a match. There were several ice-cream containers along with the other waste paper, and Hank selected one with pink runnels along its side. . . . "*Pink* ice cream! Why, Jack, you darling, darling boy!" . . . Hank straightened with the two containers—the empty and the full—and stepped to the door.

An ordinary skeleton passkey let him into a stifling hot kitchen, rank with stale cooking odors and the sour dregs of

beer. Gloved hands in front of him, Hank fumbled to the window, drew the heavy green blind before he turned on the light. Dirty dishes, a-crawl with roaches, were piled high in the sink, some of them stained pink from ice cream. Beer bottles stood on the drainboard.

Hank put the two ice-cream containers down on the stove. He then gave the two other rooms of the flat a quick prowling, returned to the kitchen finally with the package of lead arsenate that Jack had obtained for him. It was just a brown-paper bag tied with string and with one of Klinert's labels pasted on it. He put the package on the stove beside the ice-cream containers. The contents of the full container had melted to a cold mush by now. He poured part of it into the empty carton which had come from Klinert's Drugstore. Into this he poured a generous portion of lead arsenate, and mixed the concoction with a dirty spoon from the sink.

Stirring the poisoned ice cream, he thought incredulously: *Carole here? In this filthy hole?* His lips curled. Yes, Carole had been here. He'd found her favorite shade of lipstick wedged down between the cushions of the worn couch. Her favorite brand of cigarettes were in the ash trays. A snapshot of her, which Hank himself had taken, had smiled out at him from the top drawer of Jack's bureau. Carole and Jack, two of a kind, the same species—the one cultivated and the other grown rank. . . .

He lifted the carton of poisoned ice cream from the stove, dumped it out into the sink. He opened the back door, tossed the empty carton back into the basket where he had found it. A second later, he left the flat, taking what remained of the ice cream he had brought with him.

As soon as he reached home, he called Jack Blindloss at the drugstore.

"Oh, hello, Hank," Jack said, after which there was a short, uncomfortable silence. "Say, they phoned me about the missus. I'm sorry as hell, fella. She sure looked like a pretty wonderful little woman to me."

"Yes, I can imagine so," Hank said dryly. He listened to Jack drawing a quick breath. Then he said: "Carole was murdered, Jack. I thought you'd better know that I know."

"Watcha mean?" Jack's voice was snagging, worried.

"I mean that I shall expect you here at the house at ten-thirty," Hank continued. "Otherwise I shall turn what information I have over to the police. Remember, at ten-thirty." He hung up without waiting for Jack's reply.

Once more he drew on his gloves. His hands were steady, his movements deliberate. He crossed to the library, went in. Ruffy was there, playing with Carole's keycase. He removed the package containing the knife from behind the books. He unwrapped the paper, tossed it into the basket. Holding the knife by its blade in gloved fingers, he walked to the library door. He set the door ajar, grasping the edge of it in his left hand, squinted at the narrow opening between the hinged edge of the door and the frame. He raised the knife, handle first, thrust the handle into the crack at the hinged side. He pulled the door forward then, just enough to wedge the knife in place, transferred his hold on the door to his right hand, turning as he did so to back experimentally against the keen point of the blade. He felt the prick of it through his shirt at a point just below the level of his shoulder blades—a *region ordinarily impossible to reach by a self-inflicted wound*. With released tension on the door, the knife fell to the floor.

Hank smiled his satisfaction. He recovered the knife and once more wedged it between the hinged side of the door and the frame. Again he switched hands, applied the necessary pull to the door in order to hold the knife in place. There was nothing to do then but stand and wait. The thing was all but done. When he heard Jack approaching all he had to do was lean back against the knife, inflicting a shallow wound, ripping his shirt, drawing blood; then release the door, and the knife would fall. Jack's fingerprints were on the handle.

He would then attack Jack with bare fists. There was no doubt in his mind but that he could beat Jack into uncon-

sciousness. There would be a certain satisfaction in beating Jack. Then he would call the police. Jack had attacked him with the knife, he'd say. It would all be beyond his comprehension, but the police would get ideas. The police would find motive for a double murder—Carole and Hank, in that order, to get at Hank's money. For Jack was Hank's only living relative.

The police would become interested in Jack's flat. They'd find lead arsenate in the possession of a man who didn't have a garden. They'd analyze the stains on the dishes in the sink. They'd open the sink trap, find traces of melted strawberry ice cream, adulterated with lead arsenate. They'd find Carole's picture—Carole, an innocent woman, lured to the flat of a designing and murderous wretch, fed poisoned ice cream, and then sent home to die. That was the picture the prosecutor would paint for the jury. That was the evidence that would put Jack Blindloss in the chair.

Waiting, listening to the tick of the clock and the *chink-chink* of Carole's keys batted by Ruffy's paw, Hank thought, *It's a plot worthy of you, Carole dear!*

He stood there ten minutes, fifteen. He would actually wait until Jack entered the long living room from the French windows at the opposite end, then wound himself and drop the knife. There was only one small lamp burning on an end table beside the wing chair. Jack wouldn't be likely to see the knife wedged in the door, wouldn't notice it fall behind Hank.

The little French clock chimed the half hour. Only minutes now to wait. He heard the creak of the door in the garden wall, then Jack's steps hurrying along the flags, saw dimly Jack's shadow beyond the windows. Behind Hank, Ruffy clawed at the bottom of the door.

"Get the hell out of here, cat," Hank whispered. He didn't want Ruffy under foot at the critical moment. Carole's keys clinked. Ruffy scratched at the bottom of the door. Jack's footsteps sounded on the brick terrace.

"Come in, Jack," Hank called.

The screen across the French window swung back briskly and Jack Blindloss stepped into the room. Now. Now. Hank eased back against the knife, felt the point of it through his shirt, and—and paused, staring at his half-brother.

Jack had a cigarette dangling in his lean lips. His face was pale, his blue eyes narrow and cold. He had a revolver in his hand. Hank hadn't bargained for this. He hadn't counted on Jack's having a gun. He didn't want to die—only to wound himself in the back.

He stood there with the knife at his back, his right hand clutching the edge of the door. He couldn't let go of the door without his whole plan going haywire. He simply stood there and stared at Jack Blindloss.

Jack said, "You dirty son of a - - - -!" He came down the long room, his gun leveled at Hank's middle. "So you've got some information to turn over to the cops, have you? All right. So Carole and I were like that. There's a couple of ways you can look at it, Hank. Ever hear of the jealous husband knocking his wife off because he'd lost her love to another guy? You ever hear of that?"

Jack bored in close with the gun. His lips sneered around the smoldering cigarette. His eyes were knife-points piercing the cigarette haze before his face.

"You killed her, Hank. I don't know how the hell you did it, but you killed her. You—you—" Jack faltered, swallowed audibly. "She was the most beautiful thing God ever made, and you killed her."

A slow, stoical smile spread on Hank's lips. His right hand dropped from the door. The plot didn't matter now. He'd need both hands against Jack's gun, and even then—

What the hell? What the hell was wrong back there? He hadn't heard the knife drop. It hadn't dropped. It was still there, held at his back.

The damned cat had wedged Carole's keys beneath the door. The knife was at his back and in front of him Jack and Jack's gun.

Jack was saying, "And if we hadn't had the same old man, I'd shoot the living guts out of you, Hank." And then he had slammed his fist into Hank's face, driving Hank back against the knife, slugging him again. . . . "Come on, put 'em up and fight, you—!" He pocketed his gun, seized Hank by the shirt front, hauled him forward, away from the knife, hung onto him, trying to keep him upright in order to hit him again.

"Jack, for God's sake—"

"Geez!" Jack let him go. Jack had seen the knife wedged in the door. He backed away, saw Hank's knees buckling, saw him pitch forward onto the floor. He said, "Geez!" again. Then, back-stepping, he tripped over the cord of the lamp on the end table. The lamp crashed to the floor, went out, and in the sudden darkness Jack Blindloss turned in a flood of panic and rushed from the house. . . .

He was not yet dead. Not quite. The picture was exactly as he had planned it, for Ruffy had worked Carole's keycase loose from the door and the knife with the telltale prints had fallen. It was exactly the same, except that he, Hank Blindloss, was dying. But he was not yet dead, and he had to live a little longer. There had to be some final flare of strength, some energy to spend, to reach the phone. He had to tell somebody the truth, because now he saw Jack Blindloss in a different light, saw in him the common denominator. Jack was a sap, as Hank and Angus and Kip and the Carter boy were saps. He couldn't help doing what he had done. It was Carole's fatal, deceptive beauty, and Jack couldn't have helped himself.

Now, he thought, *now*—and inched himself nearer the table where the phone was. If he could reach a leg of the table to haul on it and topple the phone to the floor . . . if he had strength enough for that. . . . He had to talk to somebody—*anybody*. . . . Listen, anybody, I'm Hank Blindloss. You never heard of me, but read the papers tomorrow and you will. Now get this: I killed Carole. She's my wife. A witch-woman. I poisoned her so cleverly nothing could incriminate me. I

wasn't even in town. Carole always drank soft water. You see? I simply disconnected the outlet pipe from the water-softening cylinder in the basement. Then I poured all the arsenate of lead I had on hand into the cylinder.

The poison is slow, deadly, and cumulative. Lead and arsenic. She must have died horribly, and I killed her. When the soft-water service man comes in a day or two, he'll take that cylinder away, leaving a regenerated one. Regenerating the cylinder they take from this house, they'll wash the zeolite by forcing water under pressure through the cylinder. You see? All evidence of the poison will go down the drain at the soft-water service station. Clever, isn't it? She deserved to die like that. But Jack doesn't deserve to die. Jack's a sap, like the rest of us, and she was a witch. She should have burned at the stake, but poison was next best for her. . . .

That was what he had to tell to somebody. To *anybody*.

He felt a surge of strength like a brand of fire. His hands pressed against the floor, raising his torso. He dragged himself forward, dropped flat again, gasping. One gloved hand went out, struck the leg of the little table. *Hang onto it. Pull the damned thing over. Get the phone down on the floor.*

The table tilted, crashed over upon him. For an instant, he thought that this was the end. And then, close by his head he heard a faint, steady buzz. Line buzz from the phone. The handset was near his head. Now, where was the stand? His gloved right hand went out, groping. Table legs, phone cords. . . . *Follow the cord down, down toward the handset.*

He found the stand. His hand pressed flat against the dial. He felt the finger stop of the dial through the gloves. *Now. Below the finger stop, just below—dial the operator. Finger in the hole and drag the dial around. All the way. Now. Get your damned hand away. Let the dial go. Now. Listen.*

"This is the operator."

Hank drew a tremulous breath. *Now. Loud. Tell her and make her hear.*

"Listen. This—this—Hank Blindloss. . . . I killed my wife.

Lead arsenate in water softener . . . Framed Jack. Stabbed myself . . . Jack's prints on the knife. . . . I wore gloves. They'll find the gloves. They . . ."

"Hello." From the operator. "Hello!"

He didn't answer. The flat earth tilted, lifted toward the perpendicular. He was sliding swiftly across the earth now, toward the ends of it, toward the black abyss. There was a loud and constant clicking in his brain, like the tick of a clock held close to his ear. Carole. Carole was there.

If there was anything at all in the black abyss, it would be Carole, waiting for him. There was no escape from her, **even now. . . .**

Slick Trick

Any critical comment on this brilliant story would only divulge the plot. Subtle to the nth degree, Emil Dill is such a smooth operator and puts his plan into action with such acumen that the final scene explodes in the face of the reader with the force of a time bomb. Here is one story you will go back and study, to locate the elements missed on the first reading—to discover they were there all the time!

EMIL DILL lounged against the end of the precinct desk and stared at Lieutenant Herb Farron. Dill is night police-run man for the *Ledger-Gazette*, but he doesn't look the way people not in the business expect a reporter to. He's a good fifty, and you might take him for an unprosperous deacon. He doesn't smoke, and the only time he takes a drink is when he thinks it's professionally politic to accept the offer of one.

Outside of playing lots of hearts and poker in the headquarters press room, Dill's only social activity is going around to Boy Scout meetings and church suppers and small lodges and such get-togethers. He entertains them with sleight of hand. He's just fair, but it's his only hobby and he loves to ride it.

Leaning on the desk, Dill never took his eyes off the lieutenant. Farron pretended to be more interested than there was any call to be in the blotter entries put down by the day man he'd just relieved. The two of them always pretend to be cordial, but in the three years Farron has been on the Central Station desk he has never given Dill any more of a story than is strictly required under the principle of journalistic access to public records. Dill will tell you that any policeman who is too

close-mouthed gets that way because he has so much to hide that he doesn't trust himself to talk about anything.

So Dill watched the lieutenant as if by doing it long and steadily enough he'd catch him up to something sinister. It's his quiet way of heckling a policeman he doesn't care for. Farron had just come to the point where he couldn't reasonably go on studying the blotter and pretending not to notice Dill, when the big bronze street doors opened.

You could see that the man who came in wasn't used to police stations. He hesitated by the door for the shadow of a moment, and then came across to the desk with a cross between timidity and truculence in his manner. His gait was uneven. Not precisely a limp, but one foot struck the terrazzo floor harder than the other. It made the high ceiling give back an off-beat echo.

Except that he was more stooped, he looked so much like Dill that you probably wouldn't remember which was which if you'd met them casually. When he got to the desk, he stood looking up at Farron, and the twin lamps on their brass standards brought out deep, downward slanting lines in his face.

"Well, mister, what can we do for you?" Farron asked him. He glanced sidewise, as if he hoped that Dill somehow would have disappeared.

"I'd like to make a complaint about a man who's going around with my daughter," the man said.

"What's your name?" Farron asked. He held a pencil over a note pad.

"Partlinger. Arthur Partlinger."

"How do you spell that?"

"Just like 'part' and then 'linger.' Partlinger."

"Spell it out. Give me the letters." Farron spoke irritably. Then he glanced at Dill again and changed his tone. "Surer that way, mister," he said. Partlinger spelled out his name and gave his address.

"Now what's the matter with this fellow that goes with your daughter?" Farron wanted to know.

"He's a racketeer—a cheap racketeer. I've found out that he runs a gambling place. He's not the kind of a man any decent family would want their daughter keeping company with." Partlinger spoke with accumulating heat.

Dill and the lieutenant looked at him intently. It is not of record what Farron thought. Dill thought Partlinger seemed to be a plausible enough citizen, even if he was excitable on the matter of his daughter and her boy friend. Certainly he wasn't an eccentric. Not many people can see themselves mirrored in another, and Dill probably would give you an argument if you said it was being so much like Partlinger that put him on Partlinger's side from the start. He'd more likely tell you he lined up with Partlinger because he was always ready to be against Farron.

"How old is this girl of yours?" Farron asked.

"Myrna is twenty-three."

Farron put down the pencil and pushed the note pad away. "She ain't any minor. She's old enough to know her own business," he told Partlinger. "I thought you were giving us a CDM—that's contributing to the delinquency of a minor. If you don't want her to go with this guy, talk her out of it. That's your job. You're her old man. There's nothing the police can do."

"I've tried to talk to her, but she's headstrong and willful. I can't make her understand how evil this man is." Somehow Partlinger's language reminded Dill faintly of a tract.

"Well, like I say, there's nothing we can do." Farron put brusque finality in his voice.

"You could arrest him," Partlinger argued. "You could send him to jail or run him out of town. I've found out all about him, officer. I've made it my business to. He's a gambler—a professional gambler."

"Got any proof that would make an M and O stand up in court?" Farron demanded. "That's a maintaining-and-operating charge. We can't waste time bringing in people we can't convict, you know. All that costs dough, and we got the taxpayers

to think of. Where's this guy's place? Can you dig up anybody who's played there to sign a complaint?"

Partlinger didn't answer. He just stood there, looking angry and frustrated and puzzled. After a few seconds, he turned away from the desk and for the first time took a good square look at Dill. His face changed. "Aren't you Emil Dill?" he asked. "Aren't you a reporter who writes up things for the *Ledger-Gazette*? You wouldn't remember me, but I remember you. You put on a magic show for our men's supper club last spring. Just after Easter, it was, at Centennial Number Two-seventy-seven Hall."

Dill nodded. "Sure," he said. "I remember. I finished up with my flag-and-water-glass trick."

"Can't you do something for me?" Partlinger demanded. "Can't you write up a piece for your paper showing how the police refuse to do anything about this racketeer?"

"It's not privileged—not a matter of public record, that is," Dill told him. "We could get sued for libel and slander."

"But it's all true. I'll back you up. Besides, you wouldn't have to use this man's name." Partlinger smiled as if that cinched the thing.

Dill shook his head. He hated to string along with Farron, but the law said he had to. "It's like the lieutenant says," he explained. "Your daughter isn't a minor. She's got a right to keep company with whoever she wants. She could sue us just as quick as the man, and probably she'd be a lot more likely to. She could say you were a meddler and a troublemaker, and that we'd subjected her to humiliation and mental anguish. Domestic troubles are dynamite for a newspaper, Mr. Partlinger, unless they get on a police blotter or in the files over at circuit court."

He looked up at Farron and their eyes met. The lieutenant was wearing a drooped-lid, curled-lip smile. Dill looked back at Partlinger.

"I'll tell you what, Mr. Partlinger," he said. "You come up to the press room with me and I'll listen to your whole story."

May be some angle I can use if we give it a good going-over."

Central Precinct is in the same building with headquarters. Dill led Partlinger through the swinging doors to the main lobby and the elevators.

When he came back, it was close to midnight, which is Dill's quitting time. He waited while Farron finished booking a drunk, and the drunk was led off to the cell block.

"Well," Farron asked him, "did you get a story out of the guy with the girl who won't mind her old man?"

"You could have done something for him," Dill answered. "You should have let him speak his piece. It turns out the guy this girl is going with is Dude Benja. Dude has a record longer than a hook-and-ladder truck."

"Can't molest a guy for having a record," Farron said.

"It's been done."

"This department don't use those methods."

Anyone who'd been on the headquarters run a month could have challenged that statement, but Dill let it pass. "Just the same, you ought to have done something," he told Farron. "Dude isn't the kind of a guy who ought to be let run around with the kind of a girl Partlinger'd have for a daughter."

"Dude Benja is peanuts," Farron informed Dill. "He's a tin-horn hoodlum. All he's been doing is running a little game in his room over at the old Mowry. Sure we know he's doing it. There's nothing goes on in this precinct we don't know about. But he ain't taking any sucker money. The guys who sit in at Dude's game are just like he is. They ain't school punks or visiting firemen."

Farron was warming up and getting righteous. "And besides," he went on, "suppose we did tip him over. Dude would say it was his own room and he was just having some friends in for a sociable game. He'd say we were putting the arm on him because he's got a record. For that stuff you get nothing in court except a bawling out for abusing a voter."

"Okay, so what Dude is doing over at the Mowry isn't hurting anybody," Dill conceded. "Let's get back to Myrna Part-

linger, aged twenty-three. Like I said before, Dude Benja isn't the kind of a guy who ought to be let run around with her. Somebody's got to stop him, and old man Partlinger doesn't know how."

"All I know is that the law says she's old enough to look out for herself." Farron spoke in the manner of a man who hopes he is terminating a conversation with acid.

"Because she's twenty-three, it doesn't follow she knows about people like Dude," Dill kept at the lieutenant. "If she did, she wouldn't be running around with him."

"Look, it's not me that's running around with her," Farron pointed out. "If you want to put your oar in, talk to Dude, not me."

Dill eyed the floor and ran his toe back and forth along a crack in the terrazzo. "I don't think talking to Dude would do much good," he said. "I think you'd have to do something drastic."

"I think so too," Farron agreed.

Dill traced the crack with his toe some more. "What's the number of the room at the Mowry where Dude runs this game of his?" he inquired after a long time.

"Six-seventeen," Farron informed him. "If you're thinking of going over there, I'll have the riot-wagon crew stand by." He gave a snorting, disparaging laugh. Dill went up to the press room without saying anything more and made his checking-out call to the *Ledger-Gazette* city desk.

What with stopping for coffee and a Western, it was close to one o'clock before Dill tapped at 617 in the Mowry House. There was an appreciable interval before the door opened just enough for Dude Benja to show half his face. When he saw who it was, Dude looked surprised. But he let Dill in and at least made it look as if he were pleased to. There were three other men in the room, all with their chairs pushed back from the table. One had his right hand shoved under his coat at the shoulder.

Dill recognized the man with the hidden hand and they nodded. It was Joe Moy. Joe was what you might call a standard suspect: one of those hoodlums the police bring in every time something nasty happens, and who never actually has anything pinned on him. Dill and Joe knew each other the way a police reporter and that kind of character will get to know each other over the years. It was the same kind of acquaintanceship there was between Dill and Dude Benja.

"Felt in a mood for a little cards tonight, and there wasn't enough action in the press room," Dill told Dude. "Herb Farron told me I might find a little higher-grade excitement here."

"I guess we can oblige," Dude said, and introduced the two men whom Dill hadn't recognized. He rendered their names merely as Morrie and Dutch.

The game turned out to be straight draw poker, and it went quietly. Nothing spectacular in the way of hands came along, but, such as it was, the luck ran mostly in Dude's direction. Dill and Morrie and Dutch played a conservative game. Joe did a little plunging that only rarely came off profitably. Dude occasionally gave the impression that he was overplaying his hand in the interests of hospitality, but it usually turned out that his opponents were less well equipped with cards than he appeared to surmise. As far as Dill could detect, however, there was nothing irregular about the proceedings.

When Dill was out twenty dollars, he said he thought he'd had plenty for one night's session. Dude offered a trite consolation and said the least the house could do was buy a drink. While he was fetching a bottle and glasses from his closet shelf, Dill spoke.

"I didn't want to mention it earlier because I thought it might upset your game," he told Dude. "But a bird came to Central Station tonight to lay in a rap about you."

Dude looked over his shoulder. "Yeah?" he said. "Who was on duty?"

"Herb Farron."

"It would have to be quite a rap to hurt my game," Dude told Dill. "What was the beef?"

"A citizen told Farron you were running around with his daughter and he wanted something done about it."

Dude laughed. "Guy by the name of Partlinger, was it?" he inquired.

Dill nodded. "If I were you, I'd pay attention, Dude," he said. "Why don't you leave her alone?"

"She's a very sweet kid," Dude informed him. "A little blonde number the way I like 'em. We're getting on fine, and her old man can go dunk himself in the reservoir. I bet Farron gave him nothing but the back of his hand."

"That's about all," Dill admitted. "Only I still say I'd pay attention if I were you. This guy Partlinger might have friends."

Dude put the bottle and glasses on the table with a thump. "You ain't got any say in this, so now we don't have to talk about it any more," he told Dill.

Dill shrugged and fanned out the cards face down on the table. While Dude measured out the whiskey, Dill just sat there running his gaze back and forth over the repetitious picture of a moonlit fountain on their backs. Joe Moy watched him doing this, and occasionally dropped his glance to the cards too. When he'd look back at Dill again, one brow would go up just the tiniest bit.

"Show you a trick," Dill said abruptly, and gathered up the deck. He riffled the cards and held them out to Joe. "Take one—any one," he invited. "You can show it to the others if you want, and be sure to remember what it is."

Joe eyed the pack cannily and then selected a card toward the bottom. He whisked this card briefly before the faces of Dude and Morrie and Dutch. Dill put the pack on the table, still backs up. "Now put your card on top of the deck," he instructed Joe. Joe obeyed, and for a moment Dill looked at its moonlit-fountain picture. Then he pushed the deck toward Joe. "Cut it anywhere you want and put the bottom part on top of the rest like in any cut," Dill said.

When Joe had finished a meticulous cut, Dill glanced at the others. "May as well all of you cut it," he told them. "It'll make the trick harder for me." When the three others had cut, Dill began dealing off the cards, flipping them down, face up. He stopped when the eight of clubs came up. "That's your card, Joe," he said.

Joe sat very quietly staring at the card. "Right?" Dill pressed.

"That's the card," Joe acknowledged. "It's a good trick, all right," he added. His brow went up a little again. Dutch glanced at Dude and then back to Dill, and said it was a good trick too. Morrie wanted to see it done again. Dude tossed off his drink and said it was now time to separate the men from the boys, and who wanted to be dealt in on the next hand?

Dill stood by his announcement that he'd had enough, and Joe Moy mentioned that he was getting sleepy. He said he guessed he shouldn't have taken the drink; that early in the morning, liquor always made him drowsy. Dutch and Morrie thought there wouldn't be sufficient action in a three-handed game.

Dill was so late getting to bed that he had only four hours sleep behind him when his wife woke him up a little before nine o'clock to tell him he was wanted on the phone. It was Nathan McKerry, the chief of detectives.

"Sorry to haul you out of the sack, Emil," McKerry told him, "but we'd like you to come right down here."

"Yeah?" Dill inquired. "What have you got that you can't give our day man?" His insides had pulled up taut, but he did a careful job with his voice. It sounded as if he didn't think McKerry could have much of anything.

The chief disregarded Dill's question. "Herb Farron says when you left headquarters last night you said you were going over to the Mowry to see Dude Benja," he said. "Did you ever get there?"

"Sure. I sat in on his game. Say, what's this about?" Dill demanded, with a sudden manifestation of curiosity.

"Dude got bumped off right there in that room where you were playing."

Dill was silent for several seconds after McKerry's announcement. Then he said, "I'll be there as soon as I can get into my clothes and find a cab."

Riding downtown, Dill was prideful, for probably something over the thousandth time in his career, at the alacrity with which his profession worked. The final editions of the morning papers carried headlines about Dude's passing. Up in the detective bureau, through which he walked to reach Chief McKerry's office, Dill met Lieutenant Farron. Farron had just come out the chief's door and was in a hurry.

"You're hot this morning, Emil," he said, without stopping. "You're the last man we know who saw Dude alive."

Dill grinned, but didn't answer. He'd do his talking to McKerry.

McKerry greeted him with a jerky nod, and Dill dropped into a chair, tossing his hat on a filing case. "How'd it happen?" he asked.

"Three slugs from a thirty-eight. Looked like he'd been trying to scram," the chief told him. "His head was in the hall and his feet in his room. Who else was in this game besides you?"

Dill gave a short moment to contemplation of the ethics concerned, and decided there were none. "Joe Moy and two birds called Morrie and Dutch. I never heard any other names for them, and I don't remember ever seeing them before," he said.

McKerry pushed a buzzer button and a detective put his head in at the door. "Get a pick-up order on the teletype," the chief ordered. "Joe Moy, Morrie Garsky, and Dutch Potter. We want 'em for the Benja job. Get word to the men on the case right away that Joe and Morrie and Dutch are hot—very hot. By the way, we got anybody over at the morgue? You never know who's going to turn up at the morgue when there's a guy like Benja in it."

"Sergeant Hale is over there," the detective told McKerry.

McKerry nodded and waved him on his way. "Now, what

happened at the Mowry while you were there?" he asked, turning back to Dill.

"I got there about one o'clock. It looked like Dude and the others had been playing cards. I said I'd like to sit in, and I did. I don't know what time I pulled out, but it was close to five when I got home. Look, Chief, with all that shooting, didn't anybody at the Mowry see anything?"

McKerry shook his head disdainfully. "Did you ever hear of anybody seeing anything important in a place like the Mowry?" he asked. "The night clerk says he remembers two men walking out through the lobby a little while before the shooting, but he doesn't remember anything that happened after people up on the sixth floor began calling his desk to say there was trouble up there. He says anybody might have gone out or come in. He was too rattled to notice. Look, Emil, did it seem to you that any of those guys might be heeled?"

"Well, when I came in, Joe Moy had his hand shoved under his coat like he might be reaching for a rod."

"Any trouble that you noticed?"

"Only trouble came when I told Dude he ought to quit running around with a certain little blonde dame. He got a little huffy over that."

McKerry wasn't interested in such mild trouble at the moment. "Was that absolutely all?" he insisted. "Nothing else happened but a quiet card game? How'd it happen to break up?"

"I got tired of losing and said I'd had enough."

"Everybody amiable about that?"

"Sure. Dude poured us drinks and I did a card trick for them." He reached in his pocket and pulled out a pack of cards. "It's a dandy trick, Chief. Let me show you."

"Look, Emil," the chief pleaded. "I've got a murder to think about this morning. Show it to me some other time."

Dill fanned out the cards. "It won't take a minute," he said. "Besides, you can't do much till they bring in Joe Moy and the other two. Pick a card. Any card you want."

McKerry gave in. It's easier and quicker to let Dill do one of his tricks than to argue him out of the urge to perform when it comes on him. Anybody around headquarters will tell you that. The chief chose a card and complied with Dill's instructions about putting it on top of the deck and then cutting.

"Who was winning at Dude's mostly?" he asked as he transposed the parts of the deck and buried his chosen card somewhere in the center.

"Dude was," Dill told him. "Cut 'em again. Cut 'em a couple of more times. It'll make the trick harder for me."

McKerry obeyed about the cutting and Dill dealt till he came to the four of hearts. "That's the card you pulled," he informed the chief. "Right?"

"Right! That's a good trick," McKerry conceded. "Only I'd like to see you do it with somebody else's deck."

"You think those cards are marked?" Dill demanded.

"I know they are. It's the only way you could do it—bury a card by cutting a deck three or four times and then calling it when you deal it out."

Dill looked hurt. "I don't use mechanical gimmicks like markings and tapered cards," he said. "Any trick you can't do with a standard deck, I don't see any use doing. Otherwise, it's sort of like sawing a woman in half—you don't really do a trick."

McKerry didn't follow the reasoning, and he repeated that he didn't think a man could do the trick without marked cards.

"Look," Dill told him. "You're a detective and I'd like to prove to you that a man in your business shouldn't jump to conclusions. I'm going to tell you how that trick is done. See here, while I'm handling the deck I get plenty of chance to see the bottom card. Naturally, when you cut the deck you put what was the bottom card right on top of the one you've picked and laid on the deck. Chances are you're never going to cut just right to separate those two again, and if you do, the only thing they can do is go back to the original positions—the one I remember on the bottom and the one you've picked on top. I get a glimpse to be sure it isn't there before I deal 'em out.

If it should be, your card would be the first one off. Otherwise it's the one dealt right after the one that was on the bottom—the one I'm remembering. See how it goes?"

"Say, that's smooth, and kid simple," McKerry acknowledged. "Okay, Emil, I apologize. You don't use marked cards." He stopped short and stared at Dill. "Look here," he said, "when you did that trick up in Dude's room, did you use these cards or the deck you'd been playing with there?"

"I used Dude's deck," Dill told him. "Why?"

McKerry started to rise. He had the cards in one hand, and Dill was distinctly under the impression that the chief of detectives was going to give vent to a violent emotion by hurling them in his face. If he was, he was stayed by the ringing of the telephone. He dropped back into his chair and picked up the instrument.

"Yeah?" he snapped. . . . "Who? . . . Oh, Hale. Yeah, you're at the morgue." McKerry paused to listen. "She did, heh?" he said presently. "What's her name? . . . Myrna Partlinger, heh? Well, she might be a nut or she might be Dude's moll. But let her leave her fool flowers and go away. I just got the story. It was a card row. Joe Moy, or maybe it was Morrie Garsky or Dutch Potter, thought Dude was trimming him with a queer deck. So whoever she is, this Myrna Partlinger didn't have anything to do with Dude getting bumped."

McKerry put down the phone and turned on Dill. "It isn't that I care if a guy like Dude Benja, as such, gets killed," he said. "It's that it doesn't do this department any good to have mobsters shooting each other around town. The citizens get the idea that we haven't got things under control. I can't do anything to you, Emil, but I'd think a man with your experience could figure things out better. What'd you expect to happen when you did a trick like that with a tinhorn gambler's own deck, right in front of his customers?"

Dill nodded soberly and looked sheepish. There was awe in his voice.

"Think of a little old card trick coming out that way," he

murmured. "It was just like I'd put Dude on the spot—like I'd wanted to get rid of him for some reason." Dill brightened suddenly. "I'll bet Herb Farron would like to see that trick done—I mean what with its sort of having a history now, and everything. Is he around anywhere?" he asked.

"He'll be back later," the chief told him. "Herb had to hurry over and call off some deal about buying a secondhand car. Seems he had it all set up and then overnight something happened that threw his financial figuring out of kilter."

Don't Come Back Alive!

This unique little tale plants the seed where James Cain's "The Postman Always Rings Twice" and "Double Indemnity" plowed the ground in the insurance racket. Many detective-story characters go to great pains to dispose of the corpse after the murder, but this is a new twist on the old formula: Frank Partridge cleverly stows the body out of sight and out of mind many years before the critical moment! . . . Robert C. Dennis, as far as can be determined, has not strayed from the sure income of the pulps, but judging from performances, he has been sadly overlooked by better markets.

THERE is one thing you must understand: I am not a criminal. I do not have a criminal mind. True, the police are convinced that I killed my wife, seven years ago. That is ridiculous. I was morally incapable of killing my wife. I loved her. It is true I was responsible for her disappearance seven years ago, and I did conspire to defraud, but that was the result of circumstances.

I am *not* a criminal!

Perhaps you can remember seven years ago—1938. The depression—or recession—was almost over. Munitions plants were going into production. Europe was mobilizing. Chamberlain with his umbrella was in Munich, where he was giving away countries to hold off the war. I was thirty-nine.

"We'll have war in six weeks," I predicted.

"In Europe," Mildred said quickly. "This time we won't get into it—I hope."

"We'll be in by spring," I said.

"But you're thirty-nine, Frank," she insisted. "Surely, you wouldn't have to go!"

"I wasn't thinking of that. Listen: The last war took four and a half years. This one will take the same time—perhaps five years. No nation is capable of continuing a modern war longer than five years." I was parroting the analyses of the radio commentators, but these were my own convictions, too. "Five years. That will be nineteen forty-three. Allow two years more prosperity due to war-momentum. That's nineteen forty-five. Then what?"

"I don't know," Mildred admitted.

"Another depression. The worst in history."

I thought she was going to cry. We were not yet fully over the effects of the times just past and it had left its mark on both of us, but more so, I thought, on her. It had not been kind to her appearance. Her hair had grown stringy and was unwaved, her face was acquiring worry lines, and the old brown dress she wore didn't fit very well now.

"What are we going to do, Frank?" she whispered.

"I'll be forty-six then," I went on. "An old man as far as employment goes." It was a grim picture, and even government relief, which we had refused before, might not be forthcoming next time. It might be that bad.

Mildred gave wings to the idea with what she said next. "There's the endowment. It will be worth a little then."

"But very little," I said. The policy was a twenty-year endowment, which I had started for Mildred as soon as I had begun working again, about six months ago. I couldn't get insurance myself so I did the next best, I thought—a ten-thousand-dollar endowment. The payments were tremendous, and with another depression ahead I would never be able to keep them up. I shouldn't, I suppose, have taken so large a policy, but a little bit of prosperity had temporarily fogged my foresight.

"Very little," I repeated. "Enough to last a year or two. And after that, what?"

"I don't know," Mildred said unhappily.

"If we could just collect the whole ten thousand then—we'd be fixed for the rest of our lives."

She smiled a little. "Do you want to kill me—or shall I die a quick, natural death?"

I want you to note that. She said it as a joke. It *was* a joke. In her mind she knew I was incapable of killing her.

Speaking very slowly, I said, "No one has to die—not actually. If the insurance company *thought* you were dead—we could collect then, couldn't we?"

"But that's impossible. How could they think I was dead when I wasn't? A doctor would soon know I was alive." She tossed her head impatiently. "Come and get your dinner."

But hungry as I was, I couldn't eat. "There are two ways," I said suddenly, laying down my fork. "First, if someone died and the insurance company thought it was you, they would have to pay off. Of course, that's not possible. But the second way——"

Mildred was intent now. "What is it?"

"If you just disappeared and were never found, I could say you must be dead. And in a certain length of time the courts would declare you legally dead. Then we would collect the ten thousand."

"How long?" Mildred whispered.

"Seven years," I said. "That same seven years which would give us less than a third of the amount."

Her breath came out in a long, soft sigh. "Why, it would be nineteen hundred and forty-five!"

"Exactly. Two years after the war. Right in the middle of the depression. When others are homeless and starving, we would have ten thousand dollars!" I was excited now. "Think of it, Milly! Ten thousand dollars! We could settle down in some other place where no one knew us, a small town maybe—or buy a farm—and live comfortably for the rest of our lives. Think of it!"

She *was* thinking of it, because it meant security, and that is what women desire above all else. Perhaps I should say—all

people desire it. Certainly I did. After what I had just gone through—

"Would it work?" Mildred asked quietly. "How would we do it?"

We let our dinner get cold on the table and went into the front room, where I explained. "First, you would have to move away—to the other side of the city, perhaps, and establish a new identity, a new life. It would be better to leave town completely, but this way I think we might be able to see each other occasionally. You will get an apartment and you will have to get a job of some sort, because I won't be able to give you any money. At least, not for a while."

"But you," she protested. "Won't the police be called in?"

"Oh, I'll be suspected," I admitted. "I'll be investigated. But the police will find nothing. There will be nothing to find."

She nodded, not entirely satisfied that I would be all right. "I could disguise myself," she said, brightening a little.

"That might be a good idea. Wear different clothes—younger ones. Get a henna rinse, use lots of make-up. You can take off ten years that way." I paused and looked at her intently. "It will be hard—seven years is a long time. After it all dies down, I'll manage to see you some. But it won't be easy. Think you can do it?"

"I can do it," she said earnestly. "You'll see."

"We'll start tomorrow on it," I said.

The detective who did the investigating was named Kettle, and my first thought was a ludicrous one. He was a big, fat man, and I thought, *Kettle? He looks more like a pot!* I chuckled a little and he noticed me, so I'm sure he marked me down then and there as a cold-blooded criminal.

He went to work extremely confidently. He knew the motive, and he knew the culprit. He needed only to find the corpse, and then arrest me. Zealously, he set out to find Mildred's body.

At the end of a week he had ceased smiling that cheerful little half-smile that always had quirked his large mouth, but

he was no less confident. He just threw himself into his job all the harder.

At the end of the first month he was looking at me with new respect. For my part, I kept on as auditor for the same firm, and tended the little vegetable garden at the back of the house. It was late October now and I was digging my potatoes. One day I looked up to find Kettle watching me speculatively.

"Any news?" I'd trained myself to say that automatically, like a frantic but undespairing husband.

"You know," he said thoughtfully, "you've taught me something. Yes, sir! I underestimated you at the start. That's bad. Very bad indeed! But you're such an ordinary-looking little guy—" He broke off. "If I'd been on my toes that first week I'd have had you then, I think. Yes, sir, I think I would! You probably made plenty of mistakes, but I wasn't careful. I was too confident."

"You shouldn't talk like that," I reproved. "That's a horrible accusation. I didn't harm my wife." I turned away and hoed out another hill of potatoes.

Suddenly Kettle spoke. "That's it!" he ejaculated. "It's got to be it! Yes, sir!"

"What?" I demanded, a little startled.

He grinned cheerfully and shook his large head. "I'll bide my time, Mr. Partridge—for a little while."

He waited till all my vegetables were in the tiny cellar. Then he swooped down with two laborers armed with spades and set them to work digging up my garden.

It required a day and a half, with Kettle standing around smiling and winking at me every time I went out. He treated me as if I were a friendly opponent in some guessing game. He left the human element out of it to the extent of not having any gruesome thoughts. It was a game with him, nothing more. But one he was determined to win.

It was really amusing to watch his assurance fade. When he finally abandoned the garden, he was so crestfallen I felt almost a little sorry for him, in the same manner that he would

have felt toward me, if I'd lost. But he didn't remain dejected long. The vegetable cellar was his next guess.

He was down in that damp, dark place nearly a week.

I began to enjoy our little game. For while I had ten thousand dollars at stake, my life was not in danger. In other words, I was experiencing all the thrills of the chase, of the hunted man trying to outwit his pursuers, and with no violent end awaiting me if I failed.

The ways and means of disposing of a body were far more numerous than I had imagined. But, then, I do not have a criminal's mind. Kettle searched all possible burying places. He had an analysis made of the contents of the incinerator. He found an abandoned well in the neighborhood and lowered a man into it. He had the river dragged. He searched my house for traces of acid or quicklime; for evidence that I had cut up the body and disposed of it a piece at a time; for hiding places that I would never have thought of if I had been looking for one.

He did not overlook a single possibility, and finally came to the conclusion, I think, that the body would turn up in time, and he could only watch and wait. It was suspicious—to Kettle—that we had had no intimates in the neighborhood. In fact, everything about me was suspicious.

"But I'll get you, Partridge," he said cheerfully. "Sooner or later, I'll catch up to you. You know why? Because I've cracked every case I really put my mind to. And I've got my mind set on this one. Yes, sir!"

Two weeks later he informed me, almost heart-brokenly, that he was off the case. It was officially closed. Mildred was missing, nothing more.

Oh, he'd continue his search, Kettle assured me, brightening up a little, on his own time. He was still after me. Yes, sir!

At the end of that first year everything was going practically as I had foreseen. True, war did not come till September of 1939, nearly a full year later than I'd expected. And this coun-

try showed no intentions of getting into it then, but I remembered how we'd managed to stay out till 1917 the last time, and so I knew it had to come.

The second year was the hardest, I believe. Now it wasn't exciting. Now 1945 seemed an eternity away. And I was missing Mildred. We saw each other, of course, but surreptitiously and at infrequent intervals, because Kettle was still around. But most of all I missed Mildred's care. I was never intended to live alone. I am a poor cook and an abominable housekeeper. I began to look extremely seedy, but I kept my mind fixed on that ten thousand dollars that awaited us.

During that first year a number of bodies were discovered, as they are in every large city every year. Each time I was called in to see if it was Mildred.

There was the temptation, naturally, to say, "Yes, that is she," and get it over with so I could collect the money then and there. But I didn't give in. There was something about such a device that smacked too much of actual murder. And I was not a criminal! I couldn't bring myself to do it.

The next two years found both Mildred and me adjusting ourselves to the change and also to the next step in the course of events which I had anticipated. For we went to war late in 1941.

I found a better job at my profession as auditor and began making excellent money. So did Mildred. We were both thrifty people, and it looked as if we might have a little more than the ten thousand when we bought the small orange ranch in California, which we'd decided upon as the best place to vanish to.

The change in Mildred, too, was gratifying. At the end of the fifth year, which was also her thirty-eighth birthday, she looked younger and prettier than the day we planned our campaign. I was not seeing so much of her then because Kettle, looking more like a pot than ever, retired from the police force and bought a small house right in my block.

I don't think it was entirely intentional. He had planned to buy somewhere in my neighborhood and fortuitously found the

place he wanted only four houses away. He called on me after he was settled and said, in the same tone in which a man might challenge another to a new series of chess matches, "You see, I'm after you, Partridge. Yes, sir! I haven't given up!" He grinned cheerfully and waddled off.

I was annoyed with him now, for it meant I must be careful. With his devoting all of his time to me now, I must not give him the opportunity to discover Mildred's hiding place. Not at this late date. Not after five years. Because now conditions were different. If we had failed back there in 1938, nothing much would have been lost, since the insurance money was so far in the future then that I didn't really think of it as ours. Now, we had nearly six long, hard years behind us.

Six years of effort. I had earned that ten thousand dollars in sacrifice and denial. It had taken on proportions that made it an obsession with me. I could not let it slip away now.

So I saw very little of Mildred.

Another complication had arisen, too. I wrote the insurance company a naive-sounding letter which let them know I intended to claim my money. Instantly there was a burst of activity. There were investigators all over the place again. I say again because, of course, the company had investigated at the time of Mildred's disappearance. They gave me a bad time, although Kettle resented them almost as much as I did.

Because this was his quarry.

He had never given up; partly, I think, because he could never reconcile my small, somewhat undramatic appearance with the intelligence necessary to secrete a body where *he* couldn't discover it. He simply didn't believe I could do it. Yet, there it was, an accomplished fact. He was certainly becoming a nuisance.

I decided to make plans to disappear as soon as this last year was over and I had my ten thousand dollars. Less than a year now—only nine months. Six years and three months behind me! Think of it! Think of what it meant to me. That is a long time out of a man's life in the ordinary sense, but with me it

was worse. Because I had not been living; I had only been existing, waiting.

And then Mildred came to see me. She came very late at night, so that it was safe enough, but I was startled and irritated. I think I spoke sharply to her.

She was extremely well dressed and looked lovely and desirable, and almost immediately I lost my irritation and went to her. I put my arms around her, but she moved away. She said directly, "Frank, I want a divorce."

I was dumbfounded. I was stupefied. I didn't know her. She was a stranger.

"We've been apart too long," she went on, speaking with a crisp poise that was utterly new to me. "I have no feeling toward you now. I've made a new life, I have new friends—I have a new love."

"But our plan!" I protested. "Only nine months."

"No," she said. "I have to appear some time. So even if they gave you the money, you'd have to return it when I reappeared."

"But don't come back," I said eagerly. For now I knew I had no feeling toward her either. I simply did not know her. She wasn't my wife. "Let me collect the money. Stay in your new life."

"But I want to get married again," she told me.

"That's all right," I cried. "I'll stay away. I won't interfere. Just give me the chance to get the money."

"You mean, marry again without a divorce?" she exclaimed. "Why, that's bigamy!"

I want to call your attention to that remark. She objected to breaking the law! That, it seems to me, is conclusive proof that she did not have a criminal mind, either.

"But I'll lose my money." I was shaking all over. Vaguely, I saw how we had changed. In the new life which she had created, the money had played no part, had no importance. But I had lived only for the money, I had built my life around it. It was everything to me.

"I can give you about fifteen hundred dollars," she said, very businesslike. "I'll reappear and say I've had amnesia. We'll get a divorce."

Fifteen hundred dollars. I had worked and sacrificed for ten thousand. She couldn't do this to me: It was inhuman!

She was a stranger, not my wife, and I had no feeling for her one way or the other when I struck her. I hit her twice. Then I calmly wiped off the blood, and put the poker back where it belonged.

Looking down at her I said, to her unhearing ears, "I had to do it. Don't you understand? You stayed dead too long to come back now."

I knew what I was going to do next. I knew where I would put the body. The one safe place—where Kettle or the insurance men would never think to look.

Tomorrow I will go to court to have Mildred legally declared dead. The seven years are up. Now I will force the insurance company to pay me my ten thousand dollars.

I have only one worry, one haunting fear. And that is Kettle. He is always around, always watching me. I don't quite know what I should do about him. I could kill him, but I shrink even from the thought. I am not a criminal. I can't even think as one. I have only the fear that goes with being a criminal. And to-day Kettle gave me a horrible start. He was staring thoughtfully at my vegetable garden, almost, it seemed, at the very spot where I had buried Mildred, and then spoke speculatively.

"You know," he said, "I wonder if we shouldn't have dug deeper that first time. Yes, sir, Partridge, I think we should have dug deeper!"

White Carnations

Lieutenant Timothy Trant is a member of the New York Homicide Division who fortunately does not have the outward traits and general demeanor of the average detective. Like Philo Vance and Ellery Queen, he can wear a dress suit and appear quite nonchalant as a presentable man-about-town, without looking like a plainclothesman. . . . Richard Webb and Hugh Wheeler, who collaborate to produce the Q. Patrick, Patrick Quentin, and Jonathan Stagge stories, are gifted and prolific writers who can twist the bizarre into the commonplace, and the commonplace into the bizarre. They have demonstrated these capabilities in numerous books and short stories, with results always highly satisfying to the reader.

LIEUTENANT TIMOTHY TRANT of the New York Homicide Division eyed his visitor appraisingly. She was young, beautiful in a careful way, and cool—cool as the spray of white carnations she wore at her shoulder.

She said: "I'm Angela Forrest. You don't remember me, do you?"

Trant searched an almost flawless memory. "I don't think . . . yes, of course. Princeton. A prom. Nine years ago. A white evening dress, very little back. You waltzed superbly."

The blue eyes widened. "How extraordinary! You *do* remember! But then, why shouldn't you? I did. You've done such clever things in those nine years. That's why I thought of you when I needed help."

"Help?" queried Trant. "From the Homicide Division?"

"Help from someone in the Homicide Division who isn't just an *ordinary* policeman, help from someone with enough imag-

ination not to think I'm insane." Gravely she unpinned the white carnations from her lapel. "I've come about these flowers."

It was a passionate interest in the less orthodox aspects of human behavior which had deflected Timothy Trant, Princeton '35, from a solid business career into the police force. A pretty girl who brought flowers to the Homicide Division was unorthodox. Miss Angela Forrest was intriguing him.

"It's my birthday today." She put the carnations down on the desk. "These arrived this morning—dozens of them, anonymously."

"And it worries you?"

"It frightens me." Fear, controlled with an obvious effort, made the blue eyes hard. "You see, two other people in my family received white carnations anonymously on their birthdays. Within a few hours both of them were—dead."

"How discouraging!" said Lieutenant Trant, fascinated.

Quick to take offense, the girl flared: "You don't believe me?"

Trant smiled. "I can't believe you or not believe you until I know more."

"I—I suppose so. You want me to tell you the whole story?"

"Very much," said Lieutenant Trant. "Very much indeed."

She crossed her legs. They were good legs. The traces of fear were still in her eyes, but she was obviously on her mettle, as if she'd sworn to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help her God.

"My uncle, Colonel John Forrest, was the first. You may have heard of him. He died six months ago. Shot with his own revolver. He'd just been sent back from the Pacific. Some sort of shell shock, they said."

Lieutenant Trant remembered the case: A tired Army officer overstrained by the hell of a difficult campaign and returned to a civilian life which seemed meaningless to him. A tragic and not infrequent aftermath of war. The department had written Colonel Forrest off as an open-and-shut case of suicide.

Angela Forrest said: "Uncle John lived alone here in New

York. The whole thing happened on his birthday. The family, all of us, were coming into town to celebrate by having dinner with him. I arrived early to take him some little present. No one answered my ring. I was worried. I had the janitor open the apartment for me. The first thing we saw when we went into the living room was the white carnations—dozens of them scattered across the carpet. There was a vase, too, a broken vase and a pool of water. I bent to pick up the flowers, and saw that some of them were splotted with red. That's how I found Uncle John. He was lying there, the revolver in his hand—he had knocked over the vase as he fell." She shivered. "It was blood on the carnations."

She paused, as if steeling herself to continue. Lieutenant Trant made no comment. He merely murmured, "And?"

"The police came, of course. They investigated. They said it was suicide. Oh, the carnations didn't seem important, then. I thought it was strange his having them, because Uncle never liked flowers, but . . . but it wasn't until the next thing happened that I began to feel the white carnations were—sinister."

"There were more of them?"

"Last February. My aunt, Mrs. Lucia Dean. She was my father's sister. She died on her birthday, top. Dean—Chippogue, Long Island. Do you remember?"

Lieutenant Trant did. The case had been outside his territory but his friend, Inspector Cadbury of the Chippogue police, had been much interested in it. A middle-aged society woman who had given a family birthday party had later been found in her garage, dead from carbon-monoxide poisoning. An accident . . . that was what the coroner had said. No connection had been traced between her death and that of her brother.

"Our family always gets together for birthdays, Lieutenant," said Angela Forrest. "It's about the only time we see one another. We were all at Aunt Lucia's house. The carnations came that morning. They must have been sent anonymously, because she asked me if I'd sent them. I hadn't. Later she was found in her car in the garage—dead. Inspector Cadbury's men

brought her into the living room. We all came down. The carnations were there by her body. The smell of them seemed to be everywhere, that sweet, horrible smell . . . as if they had been sent for her funeral!" There was a catch in her voice: "That was carnations—twice. And now today when I opened that box and I saw . . ."

She broke off, throwing up her hands to cover her face.

Quietly, Trant asked: "You told Inspector Cadbury about the carnations?"

"Of course." She spoke huskily. "He wasn't interested. Coincidence, he said."

"Three coincidences," murmured Trant. "I suppose you're giving a birthday party tonight, Miss Forrest?"

"Yes. The whole family, all that's left of us. They're to spend the night."

"Put them off."

"I can't. I . . ." She stopped. "Then you *do* believe there's danger? You don't think I'm crazy to feel that . . ."

"No, there's something more than coincidence about anonymously sent white carnations arriving for two people on their birthdays a few hours before they died. Of course I don't think you're crazy." Lieutenant Trant watched her keenly. "Do white carnations have any particular significance in your family?"

"None that I know of."

"Strange," said Trant. "A murderer sending flowers to his intended victim. Very unorthodox. You suspect no one specifically, no member of the family?"

"No."

"No one has any reason for wanting to kill your uncle, your aunt—you?"

She hesitated. "Well, in a way, we all have a motive."

"In a way?"

"You'd call it a motive, I suppose. My father had all the money. When he died, he made one large trust fund. The income is equally divided among his brothers and sisters and

their children. If any one of us dies, the rest split his share."

"I'd call that a motive." Trant picked up one of the carnations from the desk. "How did these come?"

"Through the mail. Special delivery. In a plain box."

"Why can't you put off your party tonight?"

She looked at him desperately. "What good would it do? If the carnations mean what I think they mean, I couldn't stop this thing by putting a party off." She paused. "There's only one thing to do. Oh, I've thought and I've thought, and I'm sure of it."

"And that is?"

"To give the party, to give this person every chance and—
and somehow bring it out into the open." She leaned across the desk impulsively. "That's why I came to you. I thought if you'd . . ."

"Come to the party?"

"Yes. I know it's terribly . . ."

"Unorthodox," put in Lieutenant Trant happily.

"But I'm frightened, Lieutenant. I'll admit it now." She paused. "But I wouldn't be frightened—if you were with me when the danger starts."

As Lieutenant Trant watched the lovely oval of her face, he found that it was not only the detective in him that was stirred by her plea.

"It would be a little obvious, having a policeman to dinner," he murmured. "A friend, I think, don't you? An old Princeton beau?"

Angela Forrest's smile was radiant. "Then you will come?"

"Delighted," said Lieutenant Trant. "Most delighted."

Her relief was pathetic. It was as if a great burden had been lifted from her shoulders. She rose, handing him a card from her pocketbook. "Here's the address. It's an old barn of a house, but Daddy left it to me, and I've nowhere else to live. Oh, I can't tell you how grateful I am."

"On the contrary," said Trant, "I'm very grateful to you."

"For what?"

Lieutenant Trant smiled. "For giving me something interesting to think about—and for waltzing so beautifully years ago."

After she had left the office, he picked up one of the wilting carnations and stared at its limp petals.

Then he reached for the telephone.

The ensuing conversation with his friend, Inspector Cadbury of Chippogue, convinced Lieutenant Trant that something was very wrong in the Forrest family. Cadbury was competent and stolid. He had a hard-boiled man's contempt for such feminine whimsies as sinister white carnations, and he stated firmly that Colonel Forrest had unquestionably committed suicide. But he also stated that it was different in the case of Mrs. Dean. Although Cadbury had no shred of evidence to implicate any one individual member of the family, he was convinced that Mrs. Dean's "accident" in the garage had been murder.

"Call it a hunch, if you like," he grumbled into the phone, "but it's a hunch with twenty years' police experience behind it. I smelled murder at the time. I smell it still."

"Interesting," murmured Lieutenant Trant.

After ten minutes, Trant had at his fingertips the facts of Mrs. Dean's death. He learned that, so far as opportunity was concerned, any member of the Forrest clan could have faked the "accident." The people involved—presumably the same as would be present at Angela's birthday party—were four in number: Philip Forrest, Angela's cousin, a bachelor and a reasonably unsuccessful Wall Street broker with a weakness for liquor; Herbert and Lucy Bartram, twin cousins, who were both ardent and eccentric research chemists; and, finally, Miss Ellen Forrest, Angela's maiden aunt whom Cadbury described succinctly as a "holy horror."

"You're sure," inquired Trant before ringing off, "that the smell you smelled in Mrs. Dean's garage wasn't the scent of—white carnations?"

"Carnations—nuts!" snarled Cadbury. "That Forrest girl with her carnations! If you ask me, she's as batty as the rest of 'em."

"Oh, no." Lieutenant Trant sounded pained. "I wouldn't say that. Not at all. . . ."

That evening Trant arrived at the address Angela had given him, a severe, old brownstone house in a fading neighborhood. He was wearing a dashing shirt-and-tie combination in a deliberate attempt to look as unpolicemanlike as possible. Before ringing the bell, he took a stroll around the block to make sure that the precautionary plainclothesman he had bespoken had arrived. The man was there, waiting unobtrusively at the mouth of an alley which ran parallel to the back yard. Trant nodded to him and, returning to the front door, announced himself.

Angela herself let him in. She was wearing a creamy white dress which enhanced her extreme pallor. Her manner, however, was admirably controlled. With a soft little laugh, she said:

"I'm still alive, you see."

Trant was almost fooled by that laugh, but as she drew him into the hall he felt that her arm against his was trembling.

"I was hoping you'd arrive first, but my cousin Philip's already here." She lowered her voice: "Is—is there anything you think I should do?"

Trant looked very grave. "Don't get alone with anyone. That's all. If there's any chance of it, make an excuse to take me along. Promise me you'll do that."

A flicker of alarm showed in her eyes. "I promise."

Philip Forrest was in the large, old-fashioned living room with a shaker of cocktails in front of him. He was indulging the "weakness for liquor" described by Inspector Cadbury and, as Angela introduced him, he was already feeling no pain.

On the piano in a large silver bowl, Angela, rather macabrely, Trant thought, had arranged the huge bunch of white carnations. Neither the flowers nor the ramblings of Philip Forrest added much gaiety to this theoretically gay anniversary.

The arrival of the two Bartrams did not help either. Herbert

and Lucy, the chemical twins, both had red hair, thin, scientific faces, and quacking voices which spoke interminably about the problems of their current researches. Having informed Angela that they would have to leave immediately after the birthday dinner to attend an important lecture, they drank cocktails, shouted at each other, and paid no attention to anyone else.

The single, decrepit maid was in the living room bringing a second shaker of cocktails when the front doorbell rang again.

"That'll be Aunt Ellen. I'll go, Mary."

Angela started to the door and then, remembering Trant's warning, came back, took his hand, and drew him out of the room with her.

As they passed through the hall Trant ventured: "Charming relatives."

She grimaced. "Wait till you see Aunt Ellen."

When they opened the door, Aunt Ellen, large and bosomy and formidable, strode in. Inspector Cadbury's "holy horror" carried a fat suitcase and demanded to be taken immediately to the room where she was to spend the night.

With Lieutenant Trant following with the suitcase, Angela conducted her aunt to a room at the head of the stairs. As Trant set the suitcase down by the bed, Aunt Ellen emitted a shrill scream and pointed to a sleek black cat which was batting contentedly at a catnip mouse under a bureau.

"Cats, Angela! You know I'm allergic to cats. I shall sneeze now for hours and hours."

"I'm sorry, Aunt Ellen. I can't imagine how Minnie got in here."

Angela removed the cat, but Aunt Ellen was not mollified. It was impossible for her to sleep in a room where a cat had been, she said. With a sigh of resignation, Angela murmured:

"All right, Aunt. I'll sleep here. You can have my room." She turned to Trant. "Perhaps you'd be good enough to take the suitcase. Just down the passage."

Even Angela's room failed to satisfy Aunt Ellen. It was cold

she objected. There was an old-fashioned gas heater. Trant lighted it.

Aunt Ellen sneezed. "That's better. Now, Angela, let's have dinner. I'm hungry."

The birthday dinner was certainly a dismal affair. No one paid any attention to Angela, who tried bravely to be charming. Philip Forrest, unattractively drunk by now, ate in an apathetic stupor; the two Bartrams quacked at each other; and Aunt Ellen complained.

Trant, almost sure that one of these people seated around the table was a murderer, was frankly puzzled. His work had given him a grudging admiration for murderers—especially those imaginative enough to send their victims flowers. He found nothing to admire in his fellow guests.

At length they all returned to the living room. The maid had put a tray with coffee, liqueur glasses, and a bottle of peach brandy on a table by the fire, and Angela was offering liqueurs when Cousin Philip roused himself sufficiently to mutter:

"Hey, wait a minute. I got a present for Angy. In my coat. Angy's birthday."

He weaved out to the hall and returned with a bottle of brandy. "Real brandy," he announced. "Much better than that peach stuff." He broke the seal, spilled some of the liquid into a glass, and gulped it down. "Happy birthday, Angy." He splashed some into a second glass and handed it to Angela.

Angela, smiling a strained smile, thanked him and put the glass down on a little table at her side while she poured peach brandy for the Bartrams and Trant. Philip flourished the bottle at Aunt Ellen.

"How about a snorter of Angy's present, Auntie?"

"Philip, you're drunk." Aunt Ellen's eyes snapped. "Angela, why on earth do you have those white carnations? You know I hate them. All those cups Lucia won for them cluttering up my dining-room closet. I'm cold. Get my wrap. It's on top of my suitcase."

Trant rose. "I'll get the wrap, Miss Forrest."

As he returned downstairs with the wrap, he saw Angela with the two Bartrams in the hall. Her cousins were scrambling into their coats, quacking about being late for their chemical lecture.

"Nice party." The female twin pecked at Angela's cheek. "Back around eleven-thirty. Don't wait up. Is there a key?"

Angela gave her one, and the twins hurried out, slamming the front door behind them.

Angela made a helpless gesture at Trant. "I'm rather ashamed to have asked you."

He grinned. "I didn't come to be entertained, you know."

"I know." Her lovely face was pale. "But all this . . . it's so dismal and ordinary. They always act just this way. I'm beginning to believe I must have been imagining things and that—"

"The white carnations aren't sinister?"

She shivered. "What do you think?"

"I'm not thinking yet," said Trant. "I'm just watching and waiting."

Back in the living room, Trant put the wrap around Miss Forrest's plump shoulders. Philip, surly now, stirred in his chair.

"For heaven's sake, can't anyone be amusing? Angy, drink. You haven't touched your present."

He made a grab at the brandy bottle and poured some more for himself. Angela reached for her liqueur, smiled at her cousin, and tilted the glass to her lips. She was just about to drink when her forehead crinkled in a puzzled frown and she lowered the glass.

Instantly, Trant said: "Angela, I think you've got my drink. This is yours."

He passed her his glass and took hers from her cold fingers. Unobtrusively he lifted the glass to his nostrils. He realized then what had made Angela pause.

He was excited now. At last the party was becoming really —unorthodox. With a pretense of casualness, he mentioned a

forgotten phone call and asked Angela to show him the telephone. Still holding his glass of peach brandy, she led him through the dining room into a small, linoleum-floored pantry.

"Why did you change drinks?" she asked tensely. "I didn't have yours. That was mine. I know, because I left it on that table."

His eyes grim, Trant asked: "You started to drink and then didn't. Why?"

"Because . . . because the drink smelled like peach brandy and yet I saw Philip pour it out of his bottle of straight brandy. I was puzzled. I thought perhaps . . ."

Trant cut in: "Smell the glass you have in your hand. That's my drink. That's real peach brandy."

Uncertainly she sniffed at the glass.

"Okay." Trant took the glass and handed her the other glass that had been hers. "What does this one smell like?"

"Sort-sort of like the peach brandy."

"Sort of like. What else does it smell like?"

"I suppose it's more like . . ." She broke off, a look of horror slowly creeping into her eyes. "It's more like almonds."

"Exactly. Almonds. Bitter almonds."

"Prussic acid." Angela took a step toward him, and the glass dropped from her limp fingers, breaking against the linoleum. "Then . . . then it happened!"

"Smart," muttered Trant. "Poisoning peach brandy with prussic acid. If cousin Philip hadn't brought that straight brandy, it would have been foolproof. You'd have drunk it. You'd never have noticed the smell."

Now that the danger had come, Angela Forrest's control had deserted her. She stood there, swaying slightly, her eyes fixed on Trant's face. "But who . . . ?"

Trant scowled. "That's what makes me mad. I was upstairs getting the wrap. Did you leave the living room ahead of the Bartrams or with them?"

"With them, but . . . but they forgot to say good night to Aunt Ellen. They went back."

"Then any of them could have done it. Any of them."

"What—what are we going to do?"

"The Bartrams get back at eleven-thirty. We won't do a thing until then." Trant was very alert now. "Listen, I don't want your cousin and your aunt suspicious. You go back. I'll join you in a minute. And for heaven's sake don't drink anything!"

She hesitated, watching him desperately. Then, without a word, she left.

Alone, Trant stared down at the linoleum. A little pool of liquid had collected around the broken glass. He stooped, sopped the liquid up in his handkerchief, put the handkerchief into a Mason jar he found on the pantry shelf, and slipped out into the kitchen. There was no sign of the decrepit maid, who had presumably left for the night. Trant moved out of the kitchen, across the yard to the alley at the back of the house. His plainclothesman was waiting. Trant gave him the jar, telling him to rush it to the laboratory for immediate analysis and to return.

Trant went back to the living room. From the scene that confronted him, it was almost incredible that, only a few moments before, a cold-blooded and subtle attempt had been made to murder Angela. Philip, half asleep, was slumped at one side of the fire. Aunt Ellen was lost in a game of solitaire. Angela, white, with haunted eyes, sat alone on the sofa.

Trant joined her. For what seemed like an interminable period the birthday party marked time, and during that period a very unorthodox thought started to formulate in Lieutenant Trant's mind—a thought that brought a tingle of astonished fascination.

Promptly at ten, Aunt Ellen put her cards away and rose. "I'm going to bed," she informed everyone, then wrinkled her nose at Philip, who seemed to be completely asleep now. "Better get him to bed, too, Angela. Liquor. Disgusting." Like the female Bartram, she pecked at Angela's cheek. "Good night, Mr. . . . er . . . er. Good night, Angela. Nice party."

After her aunt had gone, Angela looked from the sleeping Philip to Trant.

Trant said: "I'll cope with Cousin Philip. Which is his room?"

Angela told him, and Trant shook Philip sufficiently awake to guide him upstairs and flop him onto the bed in his room, where he promptly started to snore.

Locking the bedroom door and pocketing the key, Trant came downstairs again. Angela was waiting anxiously in the hall.

"The Bartrams won't be back for an hour and a half. What are we going to do?"

Lieutenant Trant smiled at her. "You, Miss Forrest, are going to bed."

"To bed?"

"You're not going to wait up for the Bartrams. You're going to your room, and you're going to stay in it with the door locked until morning."

"But you said you were going to try to find out who . . ."

"I think I have found out." He smiled again. "And don't worry. Unless I'm very much mistaken, there won't be any more murders in the Forrest family tonight."

Angela stared. "You don't mean . . ."

Trant put his hand on her smooth white arm. "Do what I say, promise. For the sake of the Princeton prom and the white dress with very little back. Tomorrow I'll be here early, and I think I'll be able to explain everything. You'll understand then."

He leaned forward and pecked at her cheek in imitation of Aunt Ellen.

"Nice party," he said. "That seems to be the popular description of it. Good-bye until tomorrow. . . ."

After instructing his plainclothesman to keep the house under close observation, Lieutenant Trant returned to police headquarters and called Cadbury to inform the astonished inspector that, if he came into town early tomorrow morning, he would be able to arrest Mrs. Dean's murderer.

Having left Cadbury spluttering, he called the police lab-

oratory for the analyst's report on the brandy-soaked handkerchief.

"Hi, Trant." The analyst's voice was sardonic. "Funny brandy on that handkerchief. Couldn't have tasted very nice."

"So I imagine," said Trant.

The analyst chuckled. "Guess I know what you've been expecting. Nice little lethal dose of prussic acid, eh? Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you. There is an alien liquid in that brandy, but it's only . . ."

"Oil of bitter almonds?" asked Trant.

The analyst snorted. "Darn you, Trant. What's the point of analyzing anything for you? You always know the right answer before the report gets back to you."

He rang off.

For a moment Trant sat at his desk, a faint smile playing around his mouth. The room was dark and dimly lighted. A sudden scuffling made him lift his eyes. A small mouse sat in the corner, watching him with beady eyes and twitching nose. Lieutenant Trant stared back at the mouse. As he did so, the color faded from his cheeks and a look of acute anxiety darkened his face.

"The catnip mouse!" he exclaimed. "Good Lord, the catnip mouse!"

He leaped from his desk, sending the mouse scurrying to safety. He ran downstairs, jumped into a police car, and started to drive recklessly toward Angela Forrest's house.

He was in danger of having made the most tragic blunder of his career.

He parked the car one block away and hurried to the mouth of the alley where his plainclothesman was waiting. He gripped the man's arm. "Has anyone gone into that house since I left?"

"Yeah, Lieutenant, the couple of redheads. Came back about half an hour ago."

"Half an hour ago," moaned Trant.

He swung around, peering at the back of the house. In the shadows he managed to locate Angela's bedroom window, and

turned swiftly to his man. "Listen, Kelly," he said, "I've got to get into that third window upstairs, and I've got to get there quick."

"Easy, sir. I looked the place over pretty good by daylight. There's a bay window on the dining room and, right above it, a drain pipe." He grinned. "Seen you tackle worse than that in your time, sir."

The two men slipped into the back yard. Kelly was right. In less than a minute, Trant had swung himself onto the roof of the bay window and had swarmed noiselessly up the short stretch of pipe to the open window of Angela's room.

Holding his breath, he slid through into the deep darkness of the room. Still as stone, he listened. Heavy, stertorous breathing came from the bed. At the sound of it, relief flooded through him.

He wasn't too late.

He stole toward the bed. In the darkness he could just make out the head of the sleeping figure. Something gleamed white on the table at the bedside. He touched it. A glass. He picked it up and saw that it was half full of milk. Tilting it, he let some of the liquid fall on his tongue. The faintly tart taste confirmed his worst suspicions.

The milk was doped.

He remembered the layout of the room. Silently, he moved past the unlighted gas heater to the clothes closet, and sneaked inside. As he waited in the darkness, he could feel the irregular pounding of the pulses in his wrists.

The luminous dial of his watch told him it was half an hour later when he heard the footsteps in the passage outside. They paused in front of the door. Then Trant heard the squeak of a key turning cautiously in the lock. The door made a tiny groan as it opened. The muffled footsteps were in the room now.

In a second Trant heard the first sound he had been waiting for—the throb of the window being stealthily shut. The tension was almost unendurable as he waited for the second, the much more sinister sound.

And, as he crouched in the darkness against the faintly perfumed dresses, that second sound came.

The sharp hiss of gas escaping from the unlighted heater.

This was the moment. Silently, he slipped from the closet to the door, and stood with his back to it. The gas hissed evilly in the darkness. He could dimly make out a figure moving from the heater, the figure that had broken into the room, turned on the gas—and had not lighted it.

He felt for the wall switch and snapped it down. As the room sprang into light there was a little scream. Trant moved his eyes from the figure of Aunt Ellen sleeping her drugged sleep in the bed to the other figure, the figure which stood transfixed between the bed and the gas heater.

It was Angela Forrest!

She had changed her white evening dress for a dark suit. She stared at him blindly.

Quietly, he said: "Catching the murderer red-handed, I believe, is the recognized cliché." He paused. "Since it will be difficult to asphyxiate Aunt Ellen without asphyxiating you and me, too, I think, with your permission, I'll turn off the gas."

Angela Forrest, her dark hair tumbled around her chalk-white face, did not speak. He crossed to the heater, turned off the gas, and moved back to the door.

His voice almost self-deprecatory, Trant said: "Extremely stupid of me to say there'd be no more murders tonight. You see, I made a great mistake. I overlooked the catnip mouse."

He continued to watch her. "I didn't realize until a few minutes ago that you'd put the catnip mouse in the spare room to lure the cat in there so that Aunt Ellen with her allergy would insist on changing rooms with you. Tomorrow, of course, poor Aunt Ellen was going to be found asphyxiated by gas in your bed. Since no one in the family knew you'd switched rooms, everyone would believe she'd been murdered in mistake for you."

He paused. "When I heard from my man outside that the Bartrams had come back, I was terrified because I knew you

wouldn't kill Aunt Ellen until they were here to be suspects. But . . . well . . . I did arrive in time, didn't I?"

Angela's tongue flickered between her lips.

Rather sadly, Trant continued: "When I left tonight, I'd realized that you faked that poison attempt yourself. Too bad you dropped the glass on linoleum instead of on the carpet. Otherwise, I'd have had difficulty in having that 'prussic acid' analyzed and discovering it was only harmless oil of bitter almonds. Yes, I saw then that you were clever, but I underestimated your cleverness. You were the poor little frightened girl. I was the big strong policeman who was to save you from being murdered. Turning a policeman into your knight in shining armor before you even committed the murder—that was brilliantly unorthodox, Miss Forrest."

Still she did not speak. As he studied her, there was an expression of grudging admiration in his eyes. "You had me summed up so well. You knew exactly the sort of story that would intrigue me. Eerie white carnations, arriving anonymously on birthdays to spell doom. Frankly, I fell for it until Aunt Ellen let slip that Mrs. Dean grew white carnations for flower shows. It was obvious to me, then, that white carnations were the most likely of all flowers to find in Mrs. Dean's house and her brother's apartment."

Angela Forrest had clenched her hands into fists.

Trant murmured: "You probably didn't murder Colonel Forrest. But the extra share of the trust fund that came to you on his suicide was pleasant, and it gave you the idea of removing Mrs. Dean too. That was meant to be an accident, but recently I suppose you got wind of the fact that Inspector Cadbury suspected murder." He shrugged. "Hence tonight's little exhibition. An ingenious scheme for proving your innocence and liquidating Aunt Ellen at the same time."

His smile was apologetic. "Excuse my inquisitiveness, but there's one thing I still don't quite understand. Why did you do it? Kill another aunt, buy a new hat? Was that the idea?"

Angela's eyes were blazing now. In a sudden, shrill voice she almost screamed:

"It was *my* money. It was always my money. It belonged to *my* father. It was wicked. The others had no right to it."

"Oh, dear!" Lieutenant Trant gave a sigh. "What a stereotyped motive. I was hoping for something a little less run-of-the-mill."

It was several days after Angela Forrest's arrest that Lieutenant Trant found the wilted carnation hidden under some papers on his desk. Almost with reverence, he picked it up and put it away in a drawer.

"For my memory book," he murmured.

Prelude to Murder

Suspenseful is the word for this story. Step by step, the plot unfolds into a "different" murder plan, with nothing so crude in evidence as the pistol, garrote, or stiletto. The characters have been created with such accomplishment that one can all but hear the music of Rachmaninoff's Prelude as Spencer DeWitt Rowland matches his wits against those of the unsuspecting Chandlers. This story will hold the interest of even the most sophisticated mystery reader, who has run the gamut from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to Elisabeth Sanxay Holding. . . . Walter C. Brown is somewhat of a newcomer to the world of detective fiction, but from this story it is apparent that his future holds great promise.

Now that it's all over, Carol and I can find only one decent thing to say about the man named Spencer DeWitt Rowland: that he had a great and genuine passion for fine music. He had music in his soul—music and murder. A strange combination, perhaps; but then Spencer Rowland was certainly an unpredictable man.

Looking back on it now, I believe that Rowland's insatiable love of music had the effect a drug might have on others, and that he deliberately sought the intoxication that beauty of sound aroused in him. It is the only way I can account for his sinister craving for Rachmaninoff's famous *Prelude in C-Sharp Minor*.

It is a lovely thing, that Prelude, with its haunting theme born of the twilight clashing of the deep-throated church bells of Russia's Novgorod. But how could Carol and I know that

in Rowland's lonely house its beautiful strains were a warning of impending evil? For to a normal person, that splendid music would inspire only high-minded thoughts and the noblest of emotions.

I remember Rowland was playing Rachmaninoff's own piano recording of the Prelude as Carol and I drove up to that lovely cottage at the end of a long and lonely gravel lane in the green heart of Piper's Woods.

The record came to its finish just as we pulled up before the house. But Carol didn't even notice that the music had stopped. She was staring, entranced, at the perfect lines of Rowland's white cottage, its deep casement windows aglow.

"Oh, Greg—look! What a perfect house! It can't be real!"

I knew exactly how Carol felt. She was looking at this story-book cottage and thinking of our furnished rooms in the overcrowded apartment house which we reluctantly called home.

We had been married just before I went overseas; now I was back in civilian life with an honorable discharge, trying desperately to find a quiet spot somewhere where I could pick up the pieces of my prewar writing career.

We knew exactly the sort of place we wanted, but our hopes of finding it soon dwindled. There was a thing called the housing shortage. Our own advertisements in the papers had brought scant results, until, like manna from heaven, came the letter from Spencer DeWitt Rowland, offering a cottage that was like an answer to our prayers. . . .

"Oh, Greg—look!" Carol exclaimed, staring in unashamedly through the glowing casements. "It's perfect inside—"

"Well, keep your fingers crossed," I warned darkly. "There must be a catch in it somewhere."

"Oh, Greg, if we could only get this place!" Carol breathed. "It's a—a dream house!"

Carol was right about that part of it. Rowland's cottage was indeed a dream house. . . . But dreams include nightmares.

As we knocked at the front door, the music inside started again. It was still the same record—the Rachmaninoff Prelude

—crashing out its resonant strains like a musical prologue for our entrance into Rowland's sinister lair.

I remember thinking it rather odd that someone should be playing the same record over again with scarcely a pause. If we had been blessed with second sight at that moment, we would have turned around and put miles between us and that lovely little house before the Prelude had reached its last dying note.

"I wonder what Mr. Rowland is like?" Carol whispered as we waited for an answer to our knock.

The door swung open, and Spencer Rowland gazed at us. He was a short, slightly rotund man in his fifties, his hair gray-ing at the temples, a short-clipped mustache above a smiling mouth.

"Come in—come in!" he invited heartily, and led us into the fire-lit living room. The Prelude music was flooding from an inlaid cabinet beside the handsome white stone fireplace, above which hung a striking portrait of a young woman.

Rowland's manner was poised and gracious. He asked us if we had had trouble finding Piper's Woods, or the private lane that led to the cottage.

"None at all," I said. "But if you hadn't given us explicit directions in your letter, I'm afraid we'd have driven right by and never even suspected there was a road here, let alone a house."

The Prelude finished and clicked off, and the room was restful and peaceful in the quiet glow of the hearth fire.

"So you're Gregory Chandler?" Rowland queried. "That's very interesting. I've read some of your books."

We talked then about things I had written, and things I planned to write, about my service overseas, and the plans Carol and I had for the future. Rowland was so easy and friendly to talk to that it was not until afterward I realized what a complete picture of our background I had given him—and still later before I began to suspect that a devious pattern had guided every gently prodded question.

"It was sheer chance that I happened to see your advertisement for a country place," he told me. "Before that, I hadn't the slightest idea of renting my cottage. But I was intrigued by the fact that you were a writer. You see, my interests also are in the artistic field. I paint."

Carol and I both glanced up to that striking portrait over the mantel, and Carol asked: "Is that one of your paintings, Mr. Rowland?"

He nodded. "My wife," he said simply. "She died several years ago. She was quite a bit younger than I, which made it all the more a shock. It's been rather lonely for me here, since then—"

Rowland paused, staring off into space. "So I decided a change might be good for me," he resumed. "Travel around for a year or two, perhaps, and probably take up my painting again."

"My plans are just the opposite," I said. "Under Uncle Sam's auspices, I've had all the traveling I want for a long time. What I need now is a quiet spot to settle down and write."

Rowland looked at us, nodding and smiling. "Yes, I feel that you two really belong in this house," he said, and stood up. "Would you like to see the rest of it?"

Inside, the cottage was much larger than we had thought, with every modern equipment for comfort and convenience. Carol was delighted with everything, and Rowland smiled at her enthusiasm.

"This is an isolated house, Mrs. Chandler," he said. "There is no telephone, and it is about six miles to Eastredge, the nearest shopping center. But you won't have to live in any primitive fashion."

He led us up an enclosed staircase to the sloping-roofed attic, which he used as a studio. There was a big skylight set into the north roof, and stacks of unframed paintings leaned against the walls.

"It's a beautifully planned house, Mr. Rowland!" Carol exclaimed as we returned to the living room. "I love it already."

"Yes," I said, "we'd like very much to have it, if we can reach an agreement about the rent—"

"I don't think we'll have any trouble over that," Rowland smiled. "It is more important to me to have careful tenants. I think that you and Mrs. Chandler would really appreciate this place, and take good care of my furnishings." He mentioned the rental—an unusually modest sum.

Carol and I looked at each other, scarcely able to believe in our good luck. After all our discouraging experiences in house-hunting, this seemed like a tale straight from the pages of the *Arabian Nights*. But it was real enough, for Rowland promptly wrote out a simple rental agreement, which we signed, and I paid him the first month's rental in cash.

"I hope you will both be very happy here," Rowland said cordially. "And now, how about a little glass of something, by way of celebration? I have a bottle of Chauvenet somewhere. . . . And we'll have some music—some of my favorite Rachmaninoff, if you don't mind."

I think Rowland must have owned every recording ever made of the Russian master's music. He fingered through the stacks of black disks—the symphonies, the piano concertos, the rhapsodies, the preludes, making a careful choice. Then, glasses in hand, we sat around the hearth, sipping our Chauvenet and listening to the flowing harmonies of Rachmaninoff's *Third Symphony*.

That Chauvenet must have been a heady wine. It put warmth in our souls and oil on the hinges of our tongues; and soon we were chatting and laughing together with the easy informality of old friends.

In the midst of our talk about music and art and books—good, rich, congenial talk that put speed on the wings to time—Rowland suddenly put down his glass.

"I have a splendid ideal" he announced. "I think you will agree with me that this has been a very fortunate meeting. We find ourselves *simpático*, as they say in Spanish. A rare thing, believe me. . . . Well, I would like to make the most of this

opportunity. Let us take the car right now, drive to your apartment, and pack your belongings. You can come back with me tonight and stay here as my guests until our lease goes into effect. What do you say?"

Well, I thought this was rushing things a bit; and frankly, I suspected it was the Chauvenet speaking, rather than Rowland. We did our best to decline graciously, but our host was genially determined.

"Why not?" he argued. "You do not like the place where you are staying—and for my part, it would please me very much to have guests in my house once again. Indeed, I would consider it a kindness on your part. I have been so much alone here——"

Well, put that way, what could we do but yield to Rowland's persuasion? He had an answer for every objection, even my final one that our small car would not hold all our baggage.

"Then we will use my car as well!" Rowland replied gayly.

In the light of later events, I have wondered what would have happened to us if we had declined Rowland's offer. I have no doubt he had some alternate plan up his sleeve, for he was a man of imagination, who knew how to plan carefully and well.

It was long past midnight when we returned to Piper's Woods, unloaded our baggage, and entered the cottage as guests of Spencer DeWitt Rowland, with no inkling of the dark purpose that lay behind this act of seemingly gay and impulsive hospitality.

After Rowland bade us good night, we stood by the window of our bedroom, looking out at the interlacing pattern of moonlight and shadow over the dark blur of Piper's Woods, and Carol leaned contentedly against me.

"Poor Mr. Rowland!" she murmured. "He must have been terribly lonesome here, Greg. The way he insisted that we come back here tonight—he's simply starved for someone to talk to——"

I thought about those words of Carol's as I lay in bed, restless and wide awake. I thought about Spencer Rowland. Why did I not feel wholly at ease about the man? The feeling puz-

zled me, because he had shown us nothing but the utmost kindness and consideration.

Just then I heard the Prelude again, its torrential strains muted by the closed doors of the living room. Rowland was playing it over and over, with scarcely a pause.

Maybe I am mistaken about the number of times he played that record; maybe my ears were playing tricks, and that faint, whispering music was only an echo in my memory. But the Prelude seemed to go on in an endless chain, and again I was assailed by a sense of something strange about this charming house and its genial host, who had such an insatiable passion for Rachmaninoff.

The Prelude was still playing as I drowsed off to sleep, but it didn't sound beautiful to me any more. It sounded rather grim and foreboding—and somehow sinister.

But there was nothing sinister about Rowland's cottage when we awoke in the morning. The rooms were flooded with sunlight, and the air tinged with the delicious aroma of bubbling coffee and crisping bacon.

We found Rowland in the kitchen preparing breakfast, and he gave us a cheery "Good morning," refusing Carol's offer to help.

It was a pleasant meal, served in the big, wide-windowed breakfast-nook that overlooked the garden.

Carol was looking particularly lovely that morning, it seemed to me; and as we lingered over our coffee and Rowland's long-stemmed Russian cigarettes, I noticed that our host was studying her with the intent absorption of the artist.

"If you ever have your portrait painted, Mrs. Chandler," he said, "you should pose in sunlight or firelight. Your face should be turned to a three-quarters profile, and tilted slightly upwards—"

Rowland paused then, as if struck by a sudden idea. "But why shouldn't I paint your portrait?" he exclaimed with enthusiasm. "Would you be willing to sit for me, Mrs. Chandler?"

Carol hesitated, flattered and a little embarrassed by this impulsive proposal. "That's terribly kind, Mr. Rowland. I—I really don't know what to say—"

"We would have ten days for it—plenty of time," Rowland urged. "We could begin today—this afternoon, perhaps. It would keep my hand in practice, and it would be very fitting for you to have it above the hearth, where my wife's picture hangs now."

And that is how Spencer Rowland began to paint Carol's picture. It seemed harmless enough at the time—so spontaneous, so casual a gesture!

Rowland started work on the portrait that very afternoon, while I was busy catching up with my correspondence.

"You must let people know where you are, Chandler," Rowland said. "I practically kidnaped the two of you last night. In fact, I don't believe you left your forwarding address at your old quarters, did you?"

"I didn't think of it," I replied. "By the way, what is the correct postal address for here? Is it just Piper's Woods?"

"No," Rowland informed me. "Sorry—there's no delivery out here. All mail goes to Box Nineteen, Eastredge Post Office. If you'll get your letters ready, I'll mail them for you—I'll be driving over to town late this afternoon. And when you've finished, join us in the studio, won't you?"

Well, my letters didn't take long; both Carol and I are short on relatives—I have only an uncle I haven't seen in years, and Carol an older married sister living in Ann Arbor. So I had only three letters of any urgency—to my uncle, to the apartment-house agent, enclosing my keys, and to my literary agent in New York.

Then I went up to the studio-attic. Carol was posed under the bright sunlight, and Rowland had already sketched in the general detail of head and shoulders.

But even in the studio one could not escape the man's passion for music. He had a portable phonograph up there, and he worked to an almost constant stream of music—Beethoven,

Brahms, Tchaikovsky, and of course the inevitable Rachmaninoff.

Later in the afternoon, while Rowland was getting his car out for the trip to Eastredge, Carol dashed off a hasty little note to her sister, and I gave the four letters to Rowland for mailing.

"I'll be back in about an hour," he said as he pressed the starter. "Better not go strolling in the woods—unless you keep to the paths."

"Are there snakes?" Carol asked.

"No—just mud!" he called back. "Like thick black molasses. You'd ruin your shoes."

As we watched him drive off, I asked Carol: "Well, beautiful, how does it feel to be an artist's model?"

"Oh, I love it," Carol said. Then her face clouded a little. "But I wish Mr. Rowland wouldn't play that Prelude so often. It's a gorgeous piece of music, but—well, enough is enough."

"He's certainly hipped on that one tune," I replied. "I heard him playing it last night, over and over again, after we'd gone to bed."

"Well," Carol laughed, "I suppose everybody has some little idiosyncrasy. Let's take a walk in this famous Piper's Woods before it gets dark."

We followed the narrow footpaths that wound at random through the woods, but it was an unpleasant place, damp and gloomy, with a smell of moldy decay about it. I had never seen such a profusion of fungous growths—toadstools and champignons flourishing in the open spaces, and rotted logs and decayed tree-stumps thickly encrusted with rubbery-looking fungi in a variety of colors—pale ivory, sulphur yellow, coral, cinnamon brown, lobster red.

"Let's turn back," Carol said uneasily. "I don't like this place. It looks as if it'd broken out with some loathsome disease."

Rowland returned from Eastredge, the back of his car filled with groceries and provisions. Carol insisted on preparing dinner that night, and over the coffee and dessert we told Rowland of our brief excursion into Piper's Woods.

"I never saw such a crop of fungi," I commented. "There are probably a lot of fine mushrooms scattered around in there, if you knew which was which."

"Very likely," Rowland agreed, "but I wouldn't trust my own judgment. When I want mushrooms, I buy them in the market in town."

"You own Piper's Woods, don't you?" I asked.

"Yes," Rowland replied. "I bought it for the privacy, but I never set foot in the place. It's damp and soggy—and depressing."

After dinner we had more Rachmaninoff as we sat around the hearth, talking, smoking, listening. Sitting there that night, Spencer Rowland was the very soul of genial hospitality. He was a most interesting talker, a man well traveled, well read, well versed in a great variety of subjects.

Up to a certain moment, I would have termed this one of the most quietly pleasant evenings in my life. But now I remember it as the night I discovered that Spencer Rowland was a deliberate liar.

The discovery came while Rowland was in the kitchen, fixing a tray of drinks. Carol was sitting by the fireplace, leafing through a magazine, and I had wandered over to the bookcase and was fingering idly through a row of books. Suddenly I came upon one with an inscription on the flyleaf—an inscription that gave me a sharp and disquieting jolt.

I was still staring at the six simple words written across the page when I heard Rowland returning; I quickly slipped the book back into place and moved toward the hearth.

My thoughts were racing around in a confused jumble as I sat there listening to Spencer Rowland, so genial, so much the perfect host. But I was looking at him with new eyes, for those faint and elusive suspicions that had nagged me so unreasonably now had a definite basis of fact. I knew now the man was a liar—that he had deliberately lied about the death of the woman whose portrait hung there above the mantel.

As I lay awake that night, thinking about the inscription in

that book, wondering whether I ought to tell Carol about my discovery, the muffled strains of the Rachmaninoff Prelude came again from the living room, just as on the previous night. I thought Carol was asleep, but she sat up suddenly.

"Greg! Are you awake?" she whispered. "He's playing that music again!"

I laughed and answered in a light tone: "We'll just have to get used to it, Carol. Apparently our friend Rowland goes off on Prelude binges. I think I'll try to get hold of that record tomorrow, and accidentally step on it."

But again, in the bright morning sunshine, with our genial host serving us across the breakfast table, it seemed ridiculous that anything in the charming little house should have an undertone of doubt or suspicion.

"Let's make an early start in the studio," Rowland suggested to Carol. "The light is perfect this morning."

As soon as Carol and he had gone up to the studio, I went into the living room and took that telltale book from its shelf. I stood there with it, staring up at the portrait above the mantel.

Alice Rowland—in a simple white dress, her copper hair braided around a small, proud head; soft blue eyes, lips curved in a faint smile. Rowland had remarked once or twice on a certain resemblance between Carol and his wife, but I couldn't see it. Carol was more vivid, her hair a deeper, richer chestnut, her eyes more gray than blue. Alice Rowland, apparently, had been only a year or two older than Carol. Rather young for a man of Rowland's age. . . .

Studying that portrait, with its sharp, incisive technique that achieved an almost three-dimensional effect, I wondered how Rowland had got on with his young wife. I wondered if she had shared his passionate enthusiasm for music—for the Rachmaninoff Prelude. Rowland had told us very little about his wife; and of that little, the most important single fact turned out to be a lie. But why—why had he lied to us about Alice Rowland's death?

Puzzling over that question, I wandered out into the garden, and then on into Piper's Woods. And as I strolled along aimlessly, I suddenly realized that although the ground here was moist and springy, there was no sign of the black mud Rowland had warned us about.

Could it be that for some reason our host didn't want us rambling in this wood? I walked on, looking around me with interest, and finally came to a faint little path that zigzagged through ferny undergrowth. The path ended at a bowl-like hollow about thirty feet wide. There was nothing in this hollow save a huge slab of gray rock surrounded by coarse grass dotted with small whitish objects.

At first glance they looked like toadstools; but when I looked more closely, I saw that they were not fungi, but cigarette stubs—stubs of Rowland's Russian cigarettes, with their hollow cardboard tips. Some were old and weathered, others quite fresh and new.

Rowland's words rang in my ears: "I never set foot in Piper's Woods." Why did he lie about such a trivial matter? Undoubtedly this hollow was one of his regular haunts, for at least half a hundred of his cigarette stubs were scattered around in the grass.

And why did Rowland come here so often? There was nothing of interest here, no vistas to paint, not even a place to sit down in comfort, unless you sat on the edge of the hard gray rock.

I couldn't figure it out, but I was beginning to feel definitely on edge as I made my way back to the cottage. Three times now I had caught Rowland in petty and useless lies, and I wondered what was hidden behind this series of untruths.

However, my suspicions ran into a dead end. I kept a watchful eye on Rowland; but never once, by word or deed, did he depart in the slightest from his role of beaming and generous host. . . .

The days passed pleasantly in that charming cottage, with their genial sharing of good talk, good food, and good music.

Carol continued to pose for Rowland, and the portrait was coming along beautifully. My first thought had been that Rowland's offer to paint Carol was an excuse to prolong his time with us. However, this thought was soon dispelled, for Carol's portrait showed every evidence of being finished on schedule, and every day Rowland made additional preparations for his departure.

In face of all this, and the man's pleasant and poised personality, I often felt ashamed of my vague and uneasy suspicions. Then in the deep of night, when I heard those muffled strains of the Prelude whispering through the hushed cottage, I'd recall that telltale inscription in Rowland's book, and that strangely littered hollow I had stumbled upon in the woods. . . . And then the Prelude—that eternal Prelude!

The portrait finished, Rowland took down his wife's picture and hung Carol's in its place above the high white mantel. He made a gay ceremony of the unveiling, opening a bottle of Cordon Rouge in honor of the occasion.

Carol and I were both delighted with the portrait, and rightly so, for Rowland had turned out a canvas any artist would have been proud to sign.

"If you like it, Mrs. Chandler, I am well repaid," he said, smiling at Carol. "Portraits are a little out of my line. I leave them to the artists who have to paint for money."

"Now you're on Greg's favorite theme, Mr. Rowland," Carol laughed. "He's always saying that every artist should be born rich."

Rowland chuckled. "Well, I'm not exactly wealthy, but I have a little money of my own, and so I can afford to paint what I please. But I have been rather unfortunate in financial matters. I might have been a very rich man." He paused, twirling the tall-stemmed glass between his fingers. "My wife came of quite wealthy people. If she had lived just a few days longer, she would have inherited a great deal of money from a favorite aunt, and today I might have been a man of great wealth." He shook his head. "To lose both a beautiful wife and a fortune at

one and the same time—well, it makes a man question the designs of Providence.”

He spoke so casually, without bitterness, without emphasis; but to my mind, already sharpened by suspicion, it was a key turning swiftly in a lock. Suddenly I stared at Rowland, and my scalp prickled as though a cold wind were blowing along my spine.

For in a sudden flash of insight I caught my first faint glimpse of the nature and scope of the peril lurking in this charming house. I was certain now that this smiling, friendly man standing by the hearth, delicately sipping his vintage champagne, was—a murderer!

Of that much, some inner instinct was trying to warn me, with cold common sense making a scoffing rebuttal. Wasn't I embroidering a series of petty lies into a sinister pattern of crime? Wasn't my writer's mind running away with me, taking me into the land of fantasy?

The rest of that evening is a confused blur in my memory. This plot that I saw in my mind's eye—did it actually exist in Spencer Rowland's brain, or was it a figment of my own imagination?

I lay awake in the darkness of our room, waiting for Rowland to play that eternal Prelude again. For a long time there was nothing but deep, hushed silence in the house; then finally it came—those muffled strains from the darkened living room.

“If he's got any tricks up his sleeve,” I thought, “he'll pull them tonight. He's going away tomorrow—unless he was lying about that too.”

I opened the door an inch or two and stood there in the blackness, listening. Finally the music stopped, and after that there was nothing but silence.

Half asleep, half awake, I kept a crazy sort of vigil through that night. But nothing happened. Then it was morning; and when Carol and I came into the kitchen, there was Rowland, innocently squeezing oranges. Sober reason told me no man ever looked less like a murderer. . . .

It was past noon by the time Rowland had completed his final preparations for departure. His traveling bags stood ready in the hall, and he was busy removing the last of his personal belongings into the attic.

"Well, everything's ready," he announced finally, and looked at his watch. "And now I must run over to town and make a few telephone calls before I leave. I want to check my train time in the city, and arrange about storage for my car. I won't be long."

Puzzled and bewildered, I watched him climb into the dark blue sedan and drive off. Did my fears have any real basis in fact? All that had happened this morning was so absolutely normal and natural, and Rowland's preparations for departure so open and authentic, that I felt like a fool over my frantic suspicions of the previous night.

Carol was busy preparing lunch, when I went out to the garage to look over my car. Inside, I noticed Rowland's leather driving-jacket hanging on a nail. I took it down, intending to ask him whether he wanted to store it or take it with him; but as I threw it across my arm, something fell out of one of the slanted pockets.

It was a letter, with Carol's writing on the envelope—Carol's letter to her sister! Rowland had kept it—and read it, too, for the envelope was slit along the top! And in another moment my searching fingers had brought forth the other letters Rowland had promised to mail for me—and each one of them had been opened!

My first reaction was a wave of anger, but almost at once I saw the true meaning of Rowland's deed: the pattern shaping up from the sum of all my assorted suspicions.

With the letters in my pocket, I rushed into the cottage. Carol was startled when she saw my face.

"Greg! What is it? What's happened?" she cried.

"Look, Carol, we've got to get out of here—and fast!" I said. "We've walked into some kind of trap—a murder trap!"

"A trap?" she gasped. "Greg, are you crazy?"

I spread out the letters. "Look at this! Here are the letters we wrote—never mailed! I found them in Rowland's jacket. It's not an oversight; he's opened them, and read them! There isn't a single, solitary person anywhere who knows that you and I are here in Piper's Woods! We're cut off here—isolated. We could be murdered in this house, and nobody would ever find it out!"

Carol gave a shaky little laugh. "Greg, what nonsense! Why on earth would Mr. Rowland murder us? I don't understand about these letters, but——"

"Now listen, Carol," I said urgently, "perhaps I should have told you sooner, but I've suspected Rowland almost from the beginning. I felt there was something peculiar going on here—the way he rushed us into moving here that first night, the way he keeps playing that damned Prelude all the time. And he's been lying to us, Carol. Deliberate lies—about his wife, for one thing. I'm positive he murdered her—and it's my guess we're next on the list!"

"Have you gone completely crazy?" Carol gasped. "Greg, that's positively insane!"

"Listen to me, Carol," I said. "Rowland's after money—big money. Didn't you hear what he said last night? If his wife had only lived *a few days longer* she'd have inherited a fortune. All right, suppose Rowland *had* murdered his wife, and buried her out in the woods. They lived alone here—nobody would know about it. Then comes word of this inheritance. To claim that fortune, all Rowland needs is a death certificate showing that his wife died *after* her rich aunt. Don't you see? That's where *you* fit into the picture. Rowland's counting on *you* to furnish him with that death certificate he needs!"

But Carol still looked bewildered. "You can't be right about this, Greg," she protested. "You talk as if all this had happened just recently, but Mrs. Rowland died several years ago."

"That's what Rowland said!" I retorted. And going over to the bookshelves, I yanked out the book with the telltale inscription. "Look at what's written on this flyleaf: *To Spencer,*

from Alice. Christmas, 1944. . . . That proves Alice Rowland was alive as late as last Christmas. Who knows—maybe she'd been murdered only a few days before Rowland sent us that letter about the cottage."

"Oh, Greg, I—I simply can't believe it!" Carol stammered.

"Look, Carol," I said. "Nobody knows we're here. Rowland could easily give us poison, or drugs, or something. I get planted out in the woods—then Rowland goes for a doctor. He tells him his wife has taken an overdose of sleeping pills, or some such story, and brings him back here. You die without regaining consciousness; the death certificate is made out in the name of Alice Rowland—and Rowland is all set to claim that fortune. It's as easy as that! The doctor has no reason to suspect you're not Mrs. Rowland. Rowland says so, and there's your portrait over the mantel to prove it! Now we know why he was so anxious to paint your picture!"

Even Carol was convinced by that time. Her face drained white as she glanced with horror at her portrait above the hearth.

"Well—we'll have to do something!" she cried out desperately. "He'll be coming back here any minute now!"

"We're getting out of here!" I said. "Right now—just as we are. We'll hop into the car and drive like hell. When we hit the main road we'll turn left, so we won't run into Rowland coming back from Eastredge. And we'll keep going until we find a police station."

We ran out of the house and piled into the car. I pressed down on the starter. It whirled and whirled, but nothing happened.

Carol and I looked at each other. "It's been tampered with!" I said. "I might've known he wouldn't overlook anything as elementary as that."

Then Carol's head jerked up. "I hear a car, Greg!" she gasped. "It must be Rowland!"

"Get on back into the house—quick!" I whispered. "Try to act natural but don't stand anywhere near Rowland. If any-

thing happens, get out the nearest door, run into the woods, and keep going!"

Carol was out of sight, and I was apparently just strolling up through the garden when Rowland's car appeared. He parked by the front door and waved to me.

I walked over to meet him. I didn't know his plans—I didn't even know whether he had a gun or not; my only idea was to keep close to him, and at the first suspicious move, swing one to his jaw as hard as I could. But he stepped out of the car harmlessly enough, several paper packages in his arms.

"I stopped at the Eastredge market," he said amiably as I followed him into the kitchen. Carol was pretending to be busy over luncheon dishes. "I brought back a nice steak, Mrs. Chandler," he called, "but I won't be able to stay for dinner. My train leaves earlier than I thought. I'll have to pull out right away.

"And here are some mushrooms," he continued, opening a neatly packed box. "You don't have to worry about these." And he smiled. "They're not the kind that grow in Piper's Woods."

Carol and I exchanged a guarded look—the same instant thought in our minds. Mushrooms—poisonous mushrooms—that Rowland had gathered in some dark recess of Piper's Woods! This was to be a quiet murder, a suave and smiling murder, in the gentle way of poison—

"Well, I'll have to say good-bye now, if I want to make my train," Rowland declared as he handed me the keys of the house. "I'll write you as soon as I have a settled address."

I helped Rowland stow his bags in the back of the car. He stood there in the bright sunlight, genial and smiling as always, and shook hands cordially with us.

"Good-bye!" he called again as he climbed into the sedan. "Good luck to you both—until we meet again!" The car began to move, and he turned and waved to us as the sedan curved from sight.

Carol and I stood looking at each other, and I wiped perspiration from my forehead.

"Maybe I should have slugged him while I had the chance,"

I said to Carol. "This is only a breather for us. He'll only ride down the lane a short distance, then hide the car and come back to watch us—and wait."

Carol's voice shook. "Oh, Greg, let's get away now—quickly!"

"We can't—not while it's daylight," I said. "He'd see us. We're safe until it's dark—until he thinks we've had our dinner and eaten those mushrooms. Their poison is narcotic, and he'll come back expecting to find us unconscious."

"Must we wait?" Carol pleaded. "Couldn't we get down to the main road and stop the first car that passes—"

"He'd see us," I said. "Chances are he's got a gun, Carol, and if we try to run, he'll use it. But if we stay here, he'll think everything is going according to his plan. As soon as it's dark, we'll break for the woods. There's a farmhouse over to the north. We'll head that way."

It was an ordeal, waiting for those few hours of daylight to pass. We crept around inside the house in restless uncertainty, watching, listening, starting at every sound. Then twilight came, and Piper's Woods became dark and forbidding in their gloomy silence.

I turned on all the lights in the living room, then the lights in the kitchen. Then Carol and I slipped out the side door into the thickening gloom. It seemed an interminable time before we reached the edge of Piper's Woods. We crouched down in the first line of underbrush, eyes and ears alert. Then we moved on, cautiously, silently. . . .

That was the trouble—the silence. We didn't know if Rowland had observed our flight from the cottage—we couldn't tell if we were being followed. We knew if we could move across that damp, spongy ground without a sound, so could Rowland. And he knew every inch of Piper's Woods, every path. . . .

If there ever was a nightmare journey, it was the trek Carol and I made through the blackness of Piper's Woods that night. The moon came up—to make hundreds of mottled shadows that shifted and wavered, any one of which might have turned out to be Spencer Rowland, blocking our path.

That damnable unbroken silence stretched our nerves as tight as a drum. Carol was near the breaking point—her breathing sounded like strangled sobs. “Steady, sweet!” I whispered, tightening my arm around her. “We must be almost through it now.”

But we weren’t. We were lost. We’d lost the path we’d been following, and all we could do was stumble on, steering by the moon. Finally, however, we waded through the last fringe of underbrush and emerged into a meadow of tall grass—and there were the lights of a farmhouse across the fields.

Exhausted though we were, we broke into a run, cutting across the fields, stumbling up the front porch of the farmhouse.

“Have you a telephone?” I gasped to the farmer who opened the door. “I want to call the police!”

The farmer’s name was Henderson, and he had a telephone, and I called the Eastredge police station. A sergeant of detectives named McMichael came to the phone, and I must have sounded pretty incoherent at first, because McMichael seemed rather skeptical of my story.

“Look, Sergeant,” I said. “There’s an easy way to check up on all this. Look through your coroner’s files, and if Mrs. Alice Rowland’s death was never recorded, then I think you’d better get busy.”

“I’ll check on that,” he said. “Stay right there, Mr. Chandler. I’ll call you back.”

But Sergeant McMichael didn’t call me back. In a surprisingly short time, he and his men arrived at the Henderson farm in person.

“Looks like something funny’s been going on, all right,” McMichael said. “There’s no record whatever of Mrs. Rowland’s death. We’re on our way over to the cottage. You’d better come back with us.”

The house was just as we had left it—the lights on, the box of mushrooms still sitting on the kitchen table. McMichael and his men made a thorough search of the house and grounds.

“Yeah, Rowland’s skipped,” McMichael reported. “I guess

when he found out you'd fled the cottage, he decided to take it on the lam. Well, he won't get far—we'll catch up with him."

McMichael had me go over the whole story again, step by step. He seemed particularly interested in that hollow where Rowland had scattered all those cigarette stubs.

"How about showing us that spot?" he asked, rising. "Can you find it in the dark?"

I led Sergeant McMichael and his men to the hollow. They flashed their electric lanterns all around the slope, and McMichael pointed to a scarred spot on the upper rim.

"I'd say that this big rock was perched up there not so long ago. Maybe it rolled down of its own accord—and again, maybe it was pushed. We'll just pry it up and have a look at the ground underneath."

Using heavy fence-rails, the men pried at the rock until they dislodged it. Then they started digging. In a little while Sergeant McMichael came over to me.

"I think you'd better go back to the house," he suggested. "This isn't going to be very pretty."

"You've found something?" I asked.

"Yes—a woman's body," McMichael answered soberly. "It's Mrs. Rowland, or I miss my guess."

Sergeant McMichael was right—it was young Mrs. Rowland's body which was under that rock in Piper's Woods. And the autopsy disclosed that she had died of poisoning—mushroom poisoning—of the same deadly *Amanita* which Rowland had so thoughtfully provided for our steak dinner.

"That's what I expected, after hearing your story," McMichael told me. "Murderers usually have single-track minds. Well, it may take some time, but we'll catch up with Rowland, all right. Don't worry about that."

Carol and I had some doubts about this confident prediction, but it seems we did Detective Sergeant McMichael an injustice, for he not only caught Spencer Rowland, but very neatly, too.

McMichael had insisted that we stay on at the cottage until

the Rowland case was settled, and he came over from East-ledge to announce the capture personally. "Well, we've got Rowland!" he said. "We figured he'd take cover in the city—criminals always think a big city is the safest hide-out. But I set a trap for him, and he walked right into it."

"What kind of a trap?" I asked.

McMichael grinned. "Well, from what you told me about Rowland playing that Prelude record all the time, I figured he must be cracked on the subject, and that he'd try to get hold of that music, wherever he was hiding out. So we covered every shop in the city that sells phonograph records, and told them to watch out for a middle-aged guy who wanted to buy a phonograph and Rachmaninoff records—"

Sergeant McMichael paused in triumph. "And that's what did the trick!" Rowland showed up at one of the stores, asking for that Prelude. The proprietor stalled him off—told him the records were on order and would be in the next day—and then phoned us the tip. Rowland had shaved off his mustache and put on dark glasses, but we knew him, all right."

"Did he confess?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah!" McMichael answered. "Once he was behind bars, he cracked up. First he tried to bluff out the story that Mrs. Rowland had picked those poison mushrooms by mistake, and eaten them. But we pointed out that Mrs. Rowland certainly hadn't picked that box of *Amanitas* he left on your kitchen table, and it didn't take us very long to break him down."

The sergeant puffed out his big chest. "That Prelude thing Rowland was so nuts about—catchy tune, isn't it? I heard it lots of times before, but I never knew what it was. I go around all day now whistling it."

Yes, I guess Carol and I are about the only ones who don't enjoy Sergei Rachmaninoff's *Prelude in C-Sharp Minor*. It's a lovely piece of music, but we'd rather not hear it again for a long, long time. And somehow we've lost our taste for mushrooms, too.

The Man Who Lost His Head

T. S. Stribling's remarkable Professor Henry Poggioli solved the case of the murdered Hindu bride in "A Passage to Benares" a month and ten days after he, Poggioli, had been convicted and hanged for the very same murder. Bruno Fischer has created a situation entirely opposite. His Jim Crane is murdered, but refuses to stay dead until extorting an eye for an eye—even though he has only the remotest idea as to the identity of his killer! "A Passage to Benares" has been called "positively thunderous"; this off-trail piece is in much the same category, though Jim Crane solves his own murder through a series of circumstances rather than through analysis of given facts.

THE woman looked at Jim Crane and screamed. She had come out of the tall brick house which he had just passed.

Crane stopped under the streetlamp and looked around. There was nobody else on that dark, empty street. The brick house stood off by itself, flanked by lots. He turned back to the woman.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

She cowered in the doorway. Her voice had stopped with that one shrill outcry, but her mouth continued to hang open. She pointed jerkily at him with a forefinger.

"You—your—" she gasped.

Fright had driven her into almost speechless hysteria. Could she be frightened of him? That was crazy. He was sure he had never before seen this dumpy, middle-aged woman.

"What's wrong?" he said, going toward her.

She put out her hands as if to ward him off, and again she screamed.

Overhead a voice shouted: "Hey, you, keep away from her!"

A man in his undershirt was sticking his head out of a second-floor window. The woman was whimpering now.

"What the devil is going on?" Crane demanded.

"You beat it!" the man said. "You want me to call a cop?"

Both the woman and the man were mad, Crane told himself. If a cop arrived, it would be tough explaining that he hadn't tried to harm the woman in any way. People always took a woman's word against a man's. Best to get away from here.

He sent his long legs down the street. When he had gone a short distance, he looked back. The woman had come all the way out on the sidewalk and was staring after him. Crane wanted none of her; she seemed capable of chasing after him with wild accusations.

He was hurrying around the corner house when he heard the woman say in a loud, cracked voice: "Did you see him, Mr. Prim?"

"Sure I saw him." That was doubtless the man at the window replying. "Luckily I heard you and looked out and chased him off."

"I don't mean that. The poor man. He frightened me so."

Crane had not stopped walking. He could still hear the voices on the other street, but no longer the words. She was nuts, all right. What had she said? "*The poor man. He frightened me so.*" That wasn't sane talk. You met all kinds of people during a walk.

He stopped. A walk? He wasn't out for a walk. He had left his house to call on Ellen Hoyt, but this wasn't the way. This street and the other he had been on when the woman had screamed were unfamiliar.

He reached the farther intersection and looked up at the signpost. The motion of his head made his stomach churn, and he wondered why that should be. Then he forgot about his stomach when he saw that he was on the corner of Washington Avenue and Fourth Street.

Ellen Hoyt lived on Washington Avenue, but near Tenth

Street. And he himself lived farther uptown. Ellen's apartment was between his home and where he now was. How in the world had he gone six blocks past his destination?

He stood at the signpost trying to remember. He had come home from his office and showered and shaved and left to take Ellen out to dinner. On pleasant evenings like this he preferred walking. But he didn't recall walking. He couldn't recall anything after having left his house until the woman in the doorway had screamed.

So he had been dreaming while strolling along, probably thinking of next month when he and Ellen would be married. He had passed Ellen's house without knowing it. Some time or other that happened to everybody. No use brooding about it.

Jim Crane crossed the street and headed toward Tenth Street. His stomach felt queasy. It had started, he remembered, when he had brought his head all the way back to look up at the signpost. His legs felt wobbly too. What was the matter with him? Had the woman's screams upset him?

A neon sign ahead read: COFFEE. He decided that what was wrong with him was merely hunger. He had had a very light lunch at twelve, and now it was around seven-thirty. A cup of coffee would hold him until he and Ellen got to the restaurant.

The lunchroom was small and grimy and deserted except for a burly counterman reading a racing form. Crane slid onto a counter stool and reached for his cigarettes.

"Coffee," he said.

The counterman looked up from his paper. He frowned. "You feel all right, mister?"

"I—" Crane was feeling a lot better now that he was sitting. "Of course I'm all right," he said testily. "Why?"

"Well, you look sort of green."

Crane chuckled. "That's what comes of being an accountant. Too much indoor work. Mind rushing that coffee? I'm late."

The counterman looked sharply at him and then turned to the coffee urn. Behind the counter there was a flyspecked mirror which had been blocked off by the counterman's broad

body. Now Crane saw himself in it, sitting hunched forward with his hat pulled low over his forehead and a cigarette dangling from his thin mouth. His long, angular face, he thought, looked like a death's head. He had never cared for his face, but Ellen said she loved it. But now it was pinched more than usual, and his complexion, which had always been sallow, was actually green.

I hope I'm not coming down with any sickness, he thought, and glanced at the wall clock over the door. It said twenty to eleven.

"Your clock's fast," he told the counterman as the coffee was set down before him.

"Maybe a couple of minutes."

"You mean three hours," Crane said and looked at his wrist-watch. The hands read the same as those on the wall clock.

It couldn't be. He had left at seven-fifteen to reach Ellen's apartment at seven-thirty. He had gone out of his way, so maybe he was a few minutes late. But three hours? And without remembering a single minute of those hours?

In the mirror he saw fear spring into his eyes. "Listen," he said tensely. "Is this Friday, October twenty-seventh?"

The counterman's brows creased. "Sure it is, mister. Say, you're as sick as you look if you ain't even sure what day it is."

Crane sighed. At least it wasn't amnesia or anything like that. But three hours lost!

Then he thought he had the answer. For some reason he had read the clock hands wrong. Not twenty to eleven, but five to eight. He turned his head to again look at the wall clock. He had been right the first time; it was the hour hand which was almost on the eleven.

"Holy God!" the counterman cried. "What happened to you, mister?"

"Eh?"

Crane took his eyes from the clock. The counterman was racing around the counter. In bewilderment, Crane watched him.

"Your head!" The counterman stepped behind Crane, and his voice was shrill with horror. "Holy God!"

Crane put a hand to the back of his neck. He felt the short hairs at the nape matted as if stuck with glue.

"Blood?" he muttered incredulously.

"It's all over the back of your jacket and—" The counterman's eyes bulged. "Jeez, don't you feel nothing, mister?"

"Why, no," Crane said slowly. "I felt a little sick to my stomach a little while ago, but it's gone away. It must be just a flesh wound."

"A flesh wound!" The counterman's manner suddenly became gentle and anxious. "Now don't you move, mister. Stay right where you are. Just you sit there while I call an ambulance."

"Oh, come," Crane said in annoyance. "It can't be much if I don't feel it. I'll wash up at my girl friend's place."

"You stay where you are." The counterman dug a coin out of his apron and rushed to the phone booth. When he was inside, he stuck his head out. "Don't get off that chair, mister. Don't try walking. Take it easy."

Crane scowled into his coffee. One thing was clear: the blow on his head was responsible for the three lost hours. But he couldn't remember what had happened. Had he fallen? Had somebody socked him and taken his money?

He fished out his wallet. Twenty-eight dollars—check. He had had nothing else of value on his person. So it had to be a fall. But where and how?

In the phone booth the counterman was saying: "Yeah, on Washington, right off Fifth. And you better hurry."

What was the guy getting so excited about? So he had lost a little blood. The wound couldn't amount to much because he didn't feel any after-effects. Again Crane put his hand up to the back of his neck. Nothing there except dried blood. His hand started to move up.

That was when the street door opened and a thick-set, swarthy man came in. He started to close the door behind him

and then froze. He gaped at Crane; his thick lips began to tremble and sweat formed beads on his brow.

Crane swung on his stool so he could face the newcomer directly. He was sure he had never seen him before. Yet this man was as scared of him as the woman in the doorway had been.

"Do you know me?" Crane demanded, getting off the stool.

Crane felt himself shudder. Maybe the woman who had screamed had been frightened by the sight of blood, and the counterman thought he was hurt badly enough to need treatment—but the swarthy man hadn't seen the back of his head. Crane had been turned partly toward him when he had entered.

What *had* happened during those three lost hours? Was the swarthy man in any way connected with the wound?

He moved to the door. Sidelong through the window he saw the swarthy man standing thirty feet beyond the store and looking back. He seemed to be hesitating over something.

Anger gripped Crane. He'd get to the bottom of this. He'd make the swarthy man tell him why he was afraid of him.

He flung the door open. The counterman came out of the booth and yelled: "Hey, mister, for God's sake! The ambulance's coming! Don't—"

Crane kept going.

The moment the swarthy man saw Crane appear in the street, he started walking rapidly uptown. He did not quite run.

"Just a minute," Crane called as he moved after him. "I only want to ask you—"

The swarthy man put his head down and dug his hands into his pockets and pumped his short legs. Crane's longer legs cut down the distance between them.

Then the swarthy man was out of sight around the Sixth Street corner. And when Crane rounded the corner, the other was waiting for him, with his wide shoulders pressed against the wall and a big ugly revolver in his hand.

"Keep away from me!" the swarthy man panted.

Crane blinked down at the gun. He said: "Don't be foolish. I only want to ask you how you happen to know me."

There wasn't much light, but Crane could see the other's face strained in fear. It didn't look like a face that frightened easily. It was a hard and cruel and ruthless face—or had been up to a minute ago.

"You're dead!" the swarthy man whimpered. "Don't touch me!"

Everybody he had met in the last few minutes was stark, raving mad, Crane told himself. Or maybe it was he himself who had lost his reason. He had to know. He decided to humor him.

"How do you know I'm dead?" Crane said. "If you never saw me before—"

The gun jerked up, and for the first time Crane realized the full menace of it. The damn idiot would actually shoot!

"You can't trick me," the swarthy man said hoarsely. "You want me to say right out how I know you're dead. You want to make sure. Well, this time *I'll* make sure." And his hand contracted about the trigger of the gun.

There was a feeble click. Nothing else.

The swarthy man looked down at his gun. Then he looked up into Crane's face. With a choked cry, he dashed past Crane and wildly up the street.

Crane remained rooted to the spot, watching the flight of that stocky shape until it was out of sight. He did not try to follow. He was afraid of a gun which unaccountably had not killed him. And he was afraid of more than a gun—of something he did not understand or even know, but that now was becoming a dim, nagging memory in back of his consciousness.

A siren sounded and then an ambulance swept past him. Looking around the corner, he saw it come to a stop in front of the lunchroom. The ambulance was for him.

He hurried in the opposite direction. The wound wasn't important enough to delay him. Ellen was probably sore at him

for not having shown up. Or worried. He had to get to her at once.

But Ellen was dead.

His breath came out in a sobbing gasp. He stopped walking and then resumed almost at once. What had made that absurd thought pop into his head? He had spoken to her on the phone at six o'clock this evening. He had had a date with her at seven-thirty, but he hadn't reached her apartment because something had happened on the way.

Ellen was dead.

There it was again, a voice inside of him telling him with dreadful certainty.

"No!" he said aloud. "That blow made me sappy; it's making me imagine things."

Ellen lay face down in a pool of her own blood.

"Stop it!" he said fiercely. "She's all right. She's fine. She had a nasty experience this morning, but nothing happened to her, and she spoke to you at six o'clock. It's you who were bleeding. It's you who were hurt."

How badly hurt? He seemed to be having no bad physical effects, yet he was having a mental reaction that was giving him terrible thoughts. He felt the back of his head, the dried blood caked at the nape. There should be a cut higher up. His hand moved up almost to the hatband.

There was no skull. His fingers kept going in.

He staggered. His hand jerked away. *I'm dead*, he thought. *That's what scared those people. The top of my head is gone. The swarthy man knew I couldn't be alive.*

He recovered, telling himself that he must have lost sensation in his fingertips. A wound always felt worse than it was.

By the light of a street lamp he could see his reflection in the window of a clothing store. The collar of his light tweed jacket was smeared with blood; a dried splotch of it trailed between his shoulders. But no matter how he turned, he could not get the back of his head into his line of vision.

He stepped into the store vestibule. The door glass was also like a mirror; it was at an angle with the store window so that he could see the back of his head. He removed his hat.

A section of his skull had sunk into his head, and there was sight of shredded bone where the hair did not cover it. It wasn't bleeding now and had probably not bled enough to have greatly weakened him. Had the blood clotted? Was the horribly pressed-in bone still a covering for the wound? He could not see well, but he had seen enough.

Yet he felt nothing but shock, and shock shook him for a long minute. Then carefully he placed his hat far back on his head, covering the visible bone. He fumbled a cigarette out of his pocket and used half a book of matches.

The screaming of the woman in the doorway now made sense. She had seen the back of his skull when he had passed under the light, and the horror of it had unnerved her. The counter-man had retained only a little more self-control. But where did the swarthy man come in? He hadn't seen the wound. Crane had always been facing him.

And Ellen was dead, lying in a pool of her own blood.

No! His mind had been affected by the blow. Desperately he tried to think. He had left his house, and then a woman had screamed. Between, in that period, Ellen lay dead. That was all there was, and it had to be a lie.

He found himself walking, and he was fighting the tremendous urge to rush to the nearest doctor, to the nearest hospital, for a chance to survive. But first he had to see Ellen.

He did not remember covering the few remaining blocks. Suddenly he was inside the apartment house, pressing the button for the automatic elevator. He rode up to the third floor, walked up the hall, turned the corner—and there was a uniformed policeman standing in front of Ellen's door.

His knees started to buckle. The cop leaped forward, grabbed his arm.

"You're hurt?" the cop asked, peering into his face. "You look sick. Say, who are you?"

Crane fought himself erect. "I'm all right. My name is James Crane, and I——"

"We been looking for you," the cop broke in excitedly.

The cop pushed the door open. There were half a dozen men in Ellen's compact one-room apartment. And Ellen was there.

She lay face down on the floor, with her long brown hair spread about her face like a halo. And there was blood in her hair and on the rug—blood which had run out of the hideous hole in her head.

It was like coming back to the scene of a tragedy, where he had been before. Three hours ago, he knew now, he had seen her just like this.

"Crane, eh?" A man with fiery eyes stood in front of him. "I'm Lieutenant Blanchard."

Crane leaned weakly against the wall. "We were to be married next month," he muttered.

A little of it was coming back to Crane. He remembered being inside this apartment three hours ago and staring down at Ellen lying dead in her own blood. He had heard a sound behind him and had started to turn, but he had never had a chance to complete that turn. And then blankness.

Crane said: "The murderer also struck me. Look." He took off his hat and turned his back to the room.

A startled gasp went up from the men. The lieutenant said sharply: "Dr. Rowland!" A chubby-faced man, who was doubtless the coroner, gently took Crane's arm and led him to the couch. Crane lay down and pressed his face to the cushion.

Fingers probed the back of his skull, but seemed to avoid the wound. Dr. Rowland said incredulously: "You mean to say you've been walking around like this?"

"I feel all right," Crane muttered. "Except once when I threw back my head too quickly to look at a signpost. It made me sick to my stomach for a few minutes. Will I be all right?"

"We'll have you fixed up in no time."

Lieutenant Blanchard asked: "Could that wound have been self-inflicted?"

"Nonsense!" Dr. Rowland straightened up. "He was struck from behind."

There was silence then. Even the murmuring of the other men in the room had ceased. Crane turned his face on the cushion and saw that Blanchard and Dr. Rowland had crossed to the other side of the room and were consulting in whispers. But the room was small and disjointed phrases reached him.

"... nothing I can do here," Dr. Rowland was saying. "... hospital ... even there ... should have died instantly ... bone pressing ..."

His voice got too low. Then Blanchard was speaking and Crane strained to hear.

"... left here under his own power ... came back ... talks all right and ..."

Dr. Rowland shook his head and his voice rose testily, so that Crane got full sentences.

"It's one of these phenomena medical men can't quite explain. I've come across it before in similar injuries. The person does not even suspect that he is fatally injured. He might feel and act normal for a considerable period, and then suddenly—" Dr. Rowland glanced at Crane and saw how intensely he was listening, and lowered his voice.

Crane buried his head in the cushion. He could finish the doctor's sentence: *and then suddenly drops dead*. He had had a cousin who had received a head injury in an auto accident. His cousin had got up and walked home, acting outwardly normal, and a couple of hours later he had collapsed and died.

The swarthy man was right, Crane thought dully. I'm dead. But not yet dead enough for him.

"Lieutenant," he said aloud, "I know who did it. It was the man who held Ellen up this morning."

Blanchard returned to the side of the couch. "What do you know about the holdup?"

"Only what Ellen told me over the phone."

Crane spoke with his eyes closed and the side of his face against the cushion. "Ellen worked for a paper mill, in the

office. Among other things, she handled the payroll. It was lunch hour and she was the only one in the office. She was behind in getting the payroll out and planned to have lunch later. She was putting the money into the envelopes when two armed men with handkerchiefs tied over their faces came in. One stayed at the door to watch if anybody came from the plant. The other gathered up the money. As he was about to leave, the knot became untied in his handkerchief and it fell from his face. He shot at Ellen, but missed. She dropped behind a desk. By then there was an uproar outside and the man whose face Ellen had seen couldn't take the time to go around the desk after her. He and the other man fled.

"Late this afternoon Ellen phoned me at my office. She was very upset. She had just come from police headquarters, where she had been shown photos, but she hadn't seen the gunman's. She could describe him only vaguely because he had no outstanding characteristics, but she was sure she would recognize him if she ever saw him again. I told her I'd be over right after work to take her out to dinner and help her get over her terrible experience. At six o'clock I phoned her again. She said she was feeling better. But when I got here at seven-thirty—" Crane's voice broke.

"Go on," Blanchard urged.

"Ellen didn't answer the door when I rang. I found it unlocked. I walked in, and there was Ellen, just the way she is now. Then I heard somebody behind me, and that's all I know." Crane shivered. "I guess after a while I recovered consciousness and picked up my hat and went out, but I don't remember."

"And you didn't see the guy?"

"Not then," Crane said. "But later." And he told about the swarthy man.

Lieutenant Blanchard frowned. "The man she described was tall and rather gaunt."

"Then it was the other man who murdered us," Crane said. One of the detectives in the room uttered an exclamation.

Every pair of eyes stared at Crane. He realized what he had said. *Us! The man had murdered us!*

Well, wasn't that the truth?

He wet his lips and went on: "The swarthy man must have been the gunman whose face Ellen didn't see. In fact, he was mostly outside the door during the holdup, so she hadn't even been able to describe his build. But he was the one who murdered her."

Gravely Blanchard nodded. "It's likely."

Crane got up on one elbow and felt bitterness choke him. "Damn you, didn't you know she'd be in danger? Wasn't she entitled to police protection?"

Blanchard said quietly, "She didn't identify anybody. We didn't have the photo in our gallery. Why should anybody guess she wouldn't be safe?"

"You cops let her die!" Crane cried. "The gunman must have had a police record elsewhere. He was afraid Ellen would be shown photos from other cities. Sooner or later she would have spotted him. He couldn't let her live."

Dr. Rowland placed a hand on his shoulder. "Take it easy, son. . . . Lieutenant, I can't allow this man to be excited."

Blanchard shrugged. The gesture said: *He's practically a dead man anyway, so what difference does it make?*

An ambulance interne arrived with the driver, who carried a stretcher. The interne glanced down at Crane, whistled softly, and did nothing to treat or even bandage the wound. It was too dangerous, or there was no use. The fact remained that they were taking him to die away from here.

When they transferred him to the stretcher, Crane opened his mouth to protest that he could walk under his own power. But it was less effort to let them just carry him away. Nothing was important. Ellen was dead, and so he was not afraid of death.

But there was something to be done. He wasn't sure just what it was, and lay thinking about it until cool air washed over him and he knew that he was in the street. Then he saw it.

"Wait a minute!" Crane said, lifting his head.

The stretcher stopped. The interne, holding the front end, turned his head to look down at him.

"There's not a thing that can be done for me," Crane said. "I know. I should by rights be dead. Ellen was struck no harder than I was. There must be a reason why I was kept alive. Twice I should have died and didn't—the second time when the swarthy man shot at me and nothing happened. I've been thinking, and the only answer is that I've been given time to find Ellen's murderer. That's why the swarthy man was sent my way when I was in the lunchroom, but I didn't know who he was at the time. Now I've got to find him again."

The driver said: "He's starting to rave, Doc."

"No," Crane insisted. "My brain has never been clearer. That's another miracle, for the bits of bone are pressing into my brain. And why didn't I bleed to death?"

"Lie still," the interne told him. "You can never tell about those head injuries. No two act the same way."

"Why bother kidding me?" Crane said wearily. "I've been lent time to find Ellen's murderer. It can't be any other way. So you've got to let me go."

"We'll fix you up fine in the hospital," the interne said soothingly. "Then you can go anywhere you like. Let's go, George."

As the stretcher started to move again, Crane considered making a break for it. But they would have their hands on him before he could get off the stretcher, and a struggle might be too much for him. He had to stretch his borrowed time. Perhaps when they reached the hospital they would leave him alone in the ambulance long enough for him to slip away.

They slid the stretcher into the ambulance. The driver went around to the front. The interne was about to climb inside with Crane when he paused to slap his pockets.

"Got a cigarette, George?" he called.

"You know I don't use 'em. There's a drugstore still open at the corner."

The interne sauntered off. Slowly, Crane sat up. Through

the still open doors the street stretched out before him. He had told them that he wanted to escape, but they had put it down to the ravings of a badly injured man. And they were not guarding him now because they could not conceive of a man with a wound like that getting up and walking away.

Then he was standing outside the ambulance, glancing cautiously about the empty street for either the interne or the driver. He was alone.

Not quite alone. The tail of his eye caught movement in the dark doorway across the street. No more than that. No definite shape—only a stirring of deeper shadows. But he knew that it had to be the swarthy man, because he had been kept alive for only one reason. He started across the street.

The shadow moved out of the doorway and became the stocky figure of a man. He peered at Crane with his head far forward. He pulled his gun out.

Crane felt no fear. He kept going across the gutter. The swarthy man had been placed there for him by the same power that was keeping him, Crane, alive.

And the swarthy man did not shoot. With the revolver dangling forgotten from his swinging hand, he raced down the street.

Crane broke into a run. At once, nausea seized him. His head reeled; he almost fell. *Careful*, he told himself. *That's one thing you can't do.*

He walked as rapidly as he could. He followed the swarthy man around the corner, and when he saw him again, the distance between them had grown to a hundred feet. Crane ran two steps and brought himself up short before he keeled over. He could not run without jerking his head. A sob of helplessness tore from his throat. He kept walking, but the other was already out of sight.

After a while Crane leaned against the wall of a house to rest. He was sick now to the core of his being and his hat seemed to weigh a ton. Only he wasn't wearing a hat; it had

been left in Ellen's apartment. He knew then that he hadn't much more time.

Suddenly he laughed with a bitterness that shook him. If some sort of divine Providence was keeping him alive for a certain job, then why hadn't Providence let him complete the job by catching the swarthy man? Now he had the whole city to hunt for him. That would baffle even the police, with limitless time and manpower.

But wait. There had to be a logical explanation why he had twice come across the swarthy man in the last hour. The second one was easy. The swarthy man had murdered Ellen; he had returned to the scene of the crime to learn if there were any developments which affected him.

And the first time? The swarthy man had been entering a lunchroom. He hadn't known Crane would be there. He had been shocked nearly out of his wits at the sight of the man he thought he had killed. He had merely dropped into a neighborhood lunchroom for food.

Neighborhood! The swarthy man lived somewhere near the lunchroom.

Crane did not remember walking those five blocks. It was as if his brain had blacked out, and when he came out of it he was looking at a neon sign which said: COFFEE. The weight on his head was becoming unbearable. His legs were turning to water.

Well, here he was, and except for an occasional passing car, the city slept. He moved on, slowly now, fighting to keep his thoughts from clouding and his legs from folding.

Running feet broke the silence. He stood very still, concentrating on the receding sound. And then, far down on the other side of the street, he glimpsed a fleeting shadow. Abruptly it swung away from the curb and vanished through a doorway.

It did not occur to Crane that it might not be the swarthy man he had seen. This was the completion of a pattern which had gone beyond his own logical reasoning. He did not doubt

that he had been deliberately brought here for the same reason that he was still alive.

There was a fire hydrant where the shape had left the street, so he was sure of the exact spot. The hydrant was in front of a boxlike two-story building. The ground floor consisted of a grocery store, and lights were in the two windows above.

There was a door to be entered, a dimly lit staircase up which to pull himself with infinite weariness, and then a small hall and another door. Men were speaking beyond that door.

One voice Crane recognized as that of the swarthy man, even though now it was shrill with terror. "I tell you, Flick, he's haunting me. Go on, laugh, but I killed that guy. I told you how he came in just when I got done with the girl, so I had to give him the business too."

"How do you know he was dead?" a bantering voice asked.

"I know how to hit 'em. It's nice and quiet and not messy. A sock on the head and they're dead before they hit the floor. And I saw what I did to that guy. Hell, half his head was knocked in!"

"Did you make sure he was dead?"

"I wasn't hanging around there longer than I had to," the swarthy man replied hesitantly. "Well, all right, say I didn't finish him. But what would he be doing hours later sitting in Steve's lunchroom, drinking coffee as calm as you please? He'd be dead or in a hospital. And he knew me, Flick. He never seen me before. How the hell did he know me? And he went after me. My gun didn't scare him none. And when I pulled the trigger, nothing happened."

"You missed him?"

"The gun was right up against him. But no bullet came out. The gun didn't shoot, and I'd just oiled and cleaned it for that payroll job."

The man named Flick chuckled derisively. "You dope! Guns miss fire lots of times."

"Maybe. So all right, the gun missed fire. So I went back to the house to see if the cops were there. They were there all

right. I didn't get it. Say this guy was hurt bad, would they let him go? Then an ambulance pulls up and they carry somebody out. It's the guy, I think. Maybe I been dreaming I seen him. Then all of a sudden there he is, not in the ambulance. He's coming across the street, straight to where I'm standing. He couldn't see me. I tell you, he couldn't. I was in a doorway. But he came straight at me. So I ran."

"You're a brave lad."

"Yeah, it's funny to you. Sure I was scared. He chased after me, but the funny thing is he didn't run. He kept walking, like he knew I couldn't get away from him. But I shook him off with no trouble. I cut through yards. I went out of my way. A bloodhound couldn't have followed me." His voice faded and then rose stridently: "Listen, Flick! I'm downstairs on this street and look back—and there he is. And he's still walking, like nothing can stop him."

"You damn fool! Did he see you come in here?"

"What's the difference? He knows where we live. But how does he know? That's what I'm asking. He's supposed to be dead. I *killed* him."

"Of all the saps!" Flick shouted. "Maybe he's calling the cops. Go look for him."

"He don't need cops, Flick. He'll come himself. He knew all along where we lived and he didn't bring no cops."

"Then go out and get him."

"I'm scared."

"You got a gun. Use it."

There was a brief silence. Then the swarthy man said more quietly: "I get the dirty jobs. I kill the girl for you. I get sent out to kill a guy I killed once already."

"Don't be a damn fool. I'll be with you as soon as I get my pants on."

The door opened so suddenly that Crane had no time to retreat. In the dimness of the hall, he stood facing the swarthy man.

An insane moan trickled from the swarthy man's lips. He said brokenly, "Flick!" and reached under his shoulder.

Crane had no plan of action. He simply moved in, and his body struck the swarthy man and the arm which was coming out with the gun. The arm and wrist and gun-muzzle were pressed against the swarthy man at the instant the fingers contracted on the trigger.

Thunder shook the small hall. The swarthy man fell away from Crane and slumped against the wall. His eyes stared sightlessly. He was dead.

"All right, guy," a voice said hoarsely. "Reach."

Crane lifted his gaze. A tall, gaunt man wearing only underwear stood in the doorway, and a black automatic was in his hand. The face was the one Ellen had described. She had died because she had seen that face during the holdup.

"So you're the lad who's been haunting Carlos." The gaunt man's eyes flicked to the dead man and back to Crane. "How much do you know?"

Crane swayed. His knees quivered; his shoulders were bowed under the weight of his head. But he felt no fear. He felt only a little relief that he was so near the end. He said: "I know that he murdered Ellen and that you are her murderer too."

The gaunt face tightened. "What I want to know is, do the cops know?"

"They don't have to know," Crane said. His voice sounded flat and unfamiliar in his ears. "I'm going to kill you." And he moved forward.

The gun roared. Crane paused at the impact of the bullet and then resumed motion.

"Stay back!" the gaunt man gasped. "I hit you!" He retreated backward into his room. His face fell to pieces with terror.

Crane smiled. "You can't kill a dead man," he said, and lunged.

The gun spoke again as Crane's hands closed over that skinny neck. He felt nothing. He was past physical sensation.

He fell with the gaunt man under him. Once more there was

the sound of a gun, distant and unimportant. Inches from his own face, Crane saw another face that no longer looked quite human. The eyes bulged, the tongue protruded, the skin turned purple.

There was no warning. Between the drawing of a breath, Jim Crane ceased to be. . . .

They had a great deal of trouble loosening the dead fingers from the skinny throat of the other dead man.

Dr. Rowland, the coroner, was puzzled. "The shooting was heard only twenty minutes ago. Rigor shouldn't have set in so firmly."

Lieutenant Blanchard turned from the hall where he had been looking down at the body of the swarthy man. "Crane must have continued to hang on while he was dying from the bullet wounds."

Dr. Rowland frowned and said nothing. After a while he stood up. "Crane was hit three times, but none of the bullets could have been fatal. He was bound to drop dead any moment. The exertion of the struggle finished him."

Blanchard drew smoke deep into his lungs. "But not until he had killed these two."

"I don't understand."

"You remember what the ambulance interne told us," Blanchard said. "Crane was raving about being kept alive by something so he could avenge his sweetheart's murder. He lived just long enough to do it."

Dr. Rowland sniffed. "Nonsense! Crane wasn't the first man I've seen alive who by all laws of medical science should be dead. This is especially true where brain injuries are concerned."

"Maybe." Blanchard studied the cloud of smoke he expelled. "You're the doctor, so why should I argue?"

Body in the Barn

Few writers can match the deftness and letter-perfect plotting of Margaret Manners. Her "Midnight Rendezvous" contains more chilling suspense in a bare few hundred words than most writers can achieve with tens of thousands; her mid-Manhattan short, "The Hanging Gardens," leaves an unaccountable "something" with the reader that cannot be shaken off for hours; and her "Thesbian Murders" is as distinctive as a blue-white and perfect diamond nestling in a pile of pitch. But in this story she has outdone virtually all of her previous work. Some of the intense suspense of "Midnight Rendezvous" is missing, but the detailed plotting, characterization, and continuity are above par.

TOMORROW there is to be a wedding at High Hollow Farm. I shall not be there. Perhaps I shall not even *be*. I am an old woman, and the disease that has made me suffer for so many years has put me in bed at last. But even if I could walk I would not go to the wedding. I turn my face to the wall and I pray that, though the wicked flourish, somewhere there must be an end to it!

If I could tell what I know! If I could make them believe me! But the town which believes impossible things about me could not bring itself to believe the truth. It seems that justice will not be done, unless I myself can become an instrument of justice. I am afraid that in life the guilty are not always punished, the good not always rewarded. I am an old woman, and I lie here having lost the love of the people I have lived with all my life.

When the pain isn't too bad I fuss in bed with a great pile

of recipes I have collected. I copy them carefully on sheets of onionskin paper. I shall put this account of evil somewhere in the middle, perhaps with the crepes Suzette. No one in this town cares about crepes Suzette. It will be a long time before anyone finds it.

I never liked the Raymonds from the beginning, when they bought High Hollow Farm from the bank and moved in. I liked her the least. She was a revolting mixture of hard bossiness and a cringing desire to be liked. Her hair was too yellow and her eyes too green, and there was too much envy in her. It was as if she wanted to possess everything to make up for all the things she obviously hadn't had.

As for him, I pitied and despised him. I suppose it's the fate of women, even old women, to have contempt for weak men. Bill Raymond was spineless. If she called him, he came. She owned the farm. Everything was in her name. It certainly didn't show much respect for him. They were a pitiful pair, always trying to prove to the other how important each was.

All this I gathered from meeting them a few times, and from being their neighbor. Over the months I watched them from Sunnyfield, which is my home. My niece Camilla is away most of the year teaching in a girls' school, and old ladies have only their curiosity for entertainment. It's wonderful what you can learn about people just by watching.

Almost at once after the Raymonds settled at High Hollow, there were small difficulties between us. There was the right-of-way which the Turnbulls had always used to the spring. I didn't intend to let people like the Raymonds go stalking about my place, so I made them go round the hill for their table water. Then there was the matter of the calf.

High Hollow, as its name indicates, is a fertile bowl above a rocky rise. One of their fields hangs over my lower pasture. I have always kept the fence up out of sheer good will, although the Turnbulls had never used the upper field because of the overhang and the danger. One night one of the Raymond calves got into it and fell over where my fence was

broken. It broke its back and had to be shot. Bill Raymond was pretty mean about it. Though, as I pointed out, there never had been livestock in that field before. He muttered a good deal and made a big to-do of burying the beast and sprinkling quicklime on it and digging it up again, and burying it again, so's to be sure I didn't miss it.

Then we had the boundary dispute. I admit the Raymonds had a good deal of right on their side, and I wouldn't have lost more than a pesky cottonwood tree. I had to cut it down later, anyway, to accommodate Mrs. Lucas' asthma. All I can say is I didn't like the Raymonds, and I didn't make it easy for them.

All one fall I built up a wall of ill feeling between the Raymonds and me. It's easy enough to do in East Huntley. I talked about them in the post office and at the market, and I admit that life was less dull for a while. My pains weren't as severe then, but even so, I was glad to have something to take my mind off them. I got to rather enjoy the whole thing, and after a time I didn't care a mite about the boundary. It was just the idea.

All through the winter it went on like that, and when Camilla came home for the Christmas vacation I wasn't speaking to the Raymonds. Bill Raymond has an eye for the girls that I didn't like. He'd smirk at Camilla like a fat little pussy cat, and though I told her not to, she always gave him a pleasant good day. She thought then that I was a silly old woman. God knows *what* she thinks now!

Then for a bit I forgot about the Raymonds, because something happened that made me feel pretty bad.

In early spring, when the ice was breaking up and the flood was raging all over the country, Ephraim Judge fell from Indian Rock into the whirlpool and was lost in the river.

He and I had been having our usual spring quarrel about whether or not he ought to paint the house that summer. He came out late one afternoon to give me an estimate which was much too high, as usual, and I riled him by insisting that he ought to give me a special deduction because of some left-

over paint of mine he had used last year on Tucker's barn.

Well, Ephraim got so mad he nearly burst a blood vessel, and I guess the whole town knew we were having a set-to, because George Benson went by just as we were at it hot and heavy. George isn't one to keep things to himself. By sundown we quieted down, settled on a price, and Ephraim left for home. It's not far to walk on a nice day, but the weather was getting nasty. It had frozen again after a thaw, and the roads were as slippery as polished floors. I told Ephraim to be careful.

He never got home. They found the place where he lost his footing. There was a pointed rock all bloody where he hit his head. He must have been unconscious when he fell down the high falls into the pool. The cold water did the rest. Nobody was surprised that the body wasn't found. It's happened before. The pool is a roiling mess in spring, and deep underwater currents suck down and shoot anything that's in it out into a river that's rushing madly to the sea at flood stage.

I felt pretty bad about it. I was fond of Ephraim. I did what I could for his widow, which wasn't inconsiderable. I've always been a person of consequence in the community, and my father before me. That's what hurts me now, worse than the thing that's eating into my body. That they could all turn against me this way.

But to get back to the Raymonds, it was just about this time that they started making overtures about the boundary. There was a good deal of mealy-mouthed talk about neighbors living in harmony, but I could see that Bill Raymond was tired of fighting for a cottonwood tree and wanted to settle with me. We had several talks about it, at Sunnyfield and at High Hollow.

At last I thought I'd whittled him down enough. And, truth to tell, there wasn't much relish in it. He'd been so whittled down by his wife already that he wasn't fair game. He was one of those chubby, ridiculous little men who give in too much and then get stubborn too late and try to recapture their au-

thority. He could be very nasty in a silly, childish way. I wondered how Evelyn Raymond could stand him.

I heard something of what she thought of him that last night when I went to High Hollow. Raymond had met me in the afternoon and asked me to come over and talk the boundary thing out over a cup of coffee.

They were having a pretty heated argument, and I could hear them before I even got to the door of the house. He was blazing out like a calliope whistle. Her voice broke in low and cool, laughing at him.

"Don't dance around like that! You look like a child in a tantrum. I hate you when you're so ridiculous."

There was a pause in which he seemed to be fizzling down. Then he said quietly, "You know I don't have to take this, Evelyn!"

She jeered at him. "Don't you? What can you do about it?"

Then his voice, hurt and, I thought, frightened:

"There are times when you could kill me, aren't there. Evelyn?"

Cold as ice, her answer reached me. "Someday I *will* kill you, you fool!" It sounded like a warning, the way she said it.

I knocked on the screen door. He came out, embarrassed and flustered. "Oh!" he said, as if he suddenly remembered he'd asked me. "Oh, Evelyn! I forgot to tell you. Mrs. Carnby's here. I asked her to come and talk to us. Come in, Mrs. Carnby."

We talked about this and that over coffee. I could see they were both upset and wanted to get rid of me. But I couldn't resist one last dig at him. I started complaining about how I didn't know why I should be sitting there acting as if they were giving me something. The whole town knew that the fence and the tree and the mound were mine up to the north-meadow boundary. But I went too far. It brought out the ugly, stubborn little boy in him.

"To hell with that!" he said rudely. "I've had enough! I've tried to be nice to you. Now get out of here, Mrs. Carnby! Good night!" He closed the door after me with a triumphant

slam. I guessed his wife was going to come in for another of his tantrums.

The next day I didn't once see him around. I met her for a minute, and she looked strange, almost elated. I didn't like it. It would be just like them to have cooked up some way of getting even with me. I waited a day or two to give him a chance to cool off, and then I went back.

She met me at the door, and the strangeness was still in her face. She was restless and nervous and seemed to be thinking of other things.

She told me her husband was away, that he wouldn't be back for some time.

"Kind of sudden for him to go off," I said meaningly.

She smiled kind of secretly, and said, "Yes, kind of sudden, Mrs. Carnby. I'm sorry about the boundary. I guess he shouldn't have made such a fuss. We won't dispute anything further. It'll be just the way you say." She seemed to want to get rid of me.

"Hadn't you better wait till he comes back?" I said. "He might not like it."

That struck sparks. She drew herself up and looked at me. "High Hollow is mine, bought with my money, Mrs. Carnby. My husband knows that."

"I think he does," I said. I thanked her and left. But, by heaven, I didn't like that woman!

All that week and the next I didn't see Bill Raymond. When I'd meet her and ask her, she'd say that she didn't expect to hear from him right away because he was so busy. She looked strained, and her eyes were larger and greener in that milk-white face, and I was sure that he'd just walked off and left her. I asked Elvira Carter, the postmistress, and she said there was never a single letter from him.

Will Carter, Elvira's son, who is the East Huntley station-master, came in one night when we were talking about it. He got pretty thoughtful. Then he told us that Bill Raymond hadn't taken a train out of town that night or any night since.

We sat there looking at each other. "Maybe you'd better tell her," Elvira said. "Maybe something happened to him!"

I made it my business to go to High Hollow right away. She was coming out of the barn as I crossed the field. There were dark shadows under her eyes. She looked as if she hadn't been sleeping nights, as if there was something on her mind. But when I told her as gently as I could, she seemed more surprised than worried.

"Well!" I said. "Aren't you going to report him missing? Maybe he had an accident." I couldn't help thinking of what had happened to poor Ephraim Judge.

"I don't think anything could be wrong," she said slowly. "It is a little strange that he didn't take the train from here. Perhaps he left from the West Huntley station."

"Good lands!" I was fairly stumped that anybody could be that dumb. "Why would he want to do that? He didn't take car nor horse. West Huntley's a big junction, but it's over fifteen miles to walk, and the town station's just a few minutes. Besides," I added, "you haven't heard from him. If he were all right, wouldn't he write to you?"

Her green eyes flashed. "You seem to concern yourself with my affairs, Mrs. Carnby. What business is it of yours? My husband expressly said he wouldn't be writing at first. That's why I'm not worried. And in the future I'll thank you to mind your own business!"

I got up to leave, thinking that was a mighty funny way for a wife to react to such news. Why should she flare up, when I was being much more neighborly than she had any right to expect?

I went home and thought about it.

The next day it happened. I was sitting at my window, sewing, when I saw the sheriff go up to High Hollow. He had a few men with him, and they were carrying spades!

Something inside me shuddered as if I already knew the dreadful thing that was to come. I put my sewing down and went right over.

The sheriff was more talkative than he usually is, and considerably more polite. It was as if he wanted to draw me out. He showed me a letter in a dirt-stained envelope that wasn't stamped and hadn't been mailed. It was addressed with one word cut out of newsprint and pasted on: SHERIFF. The message inside was the same way, pasted from print that had been cut out of something. It said: "His body is buried on High Hollow Farm." There was no signature.

"Where'd you get that?" I asked. All the time I was thinking, *So that's it! She murdered him!* It explained everything that had puzzled me. No wonder she didn't want me to take an interest in her husband's whereabouts!

"You know, you might help me with this, Mrs. Carnby," the sheriff said slowly. "You've lived next to High Hollow all your life. It's right under your eye, so to speak. And, if you'll forgive me, there isn't much your eye misses. You could save us a lot of digging. Now where would *you* think a body would be buried at High Hollow, if somebody didn't want it to be found?"

There was something in what he said. I know every square foot of the farm. "The orchard might be good," I said, "but your men would tire themselves out digging around there. I favor it's not being out where a person could see the ground had been disturbed." I was talking calmly, but I didn't really believe it yet. I didn't think they'd find anything.

"Fresh-plowed field?" Sheriff Hodge suggested, wetting his lips.

I shook my head. "Might get turned up." I thought a minute. "There's the barn, with the silly old concrete tile floor," I said. "I told the Turnbulls the tiles would work loose in time, and they have. Two of those blocks could cover a fair-sized hole. Why don't you look under them?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Carnby," he said, as heartily as if this were a county election year.

I followed him and his men up to the barn. She came out to meet us, and I couldn't help feeling pretty mean about it. She

made no objections, but stood there pale and scornful, waiting.

They lifted the loose tiles and started digging. After a while they began to look kind of silly. The sheriff kept sending angry looks in my direction, as if it was my fault. Then one of the spades hit something. They uncovered it carefully. Dark and horrible it lay there—a man's body! The clothes had completely disappeared, the flesh was eaten away in spots, and quicklime must have burned the face to the bone. For some reason I thought of the dead calf.

"It's the right build and size, all right," one of the men said.

Identification came from an unexpected source. Evelyn Raymond tottered to the edge of the hole. There was something in her eyes I hope I never see again. She looked down, and I knew something snapped in her. "Bill!" she shrieked. "*Bill!*" She kept on yelling that one word, and they finally had to get Dr. Bailey to give her an injection to stop her. Afterward, she was ugly and sullen and went around like a sleepwalker.

They brought her a metal matchbox they had found beside the body. It was stained and eroded, but the initials were plain: W.R. She sobbed and said it had belonged to her husband, but she thought he had lost it weeks before he went . . . before this. . . . It was hard for her to find the words. I thought if she didn't watch herself she'd be saying it right out—"before I killed him," just like that.

The real proof of her guilt was clutched in the dead man's hand. There must have been a struggle before the final blow fell. He had torn an odd metal button from the clothes of his murderer. The sheriff searched the house, and in her closet, stuffed away in the bottom of her ragbag, he found a bright cherry wool jacket with just such metal buttons. And one was missing! She yelled that she'd been looking for the jacket for weeks, and she didn't know how it got into the ragbag. And the button? The button had been torn off on a walk through the woods. She'd sent her husband back to look for it, but he couldn't find it. Her story was as thin as skim milk.

Her story of why she hadn't reported her husband's absence was even thinner, impossible as that may seem.

She admitted there had been tension between them. She had to, after I told them about the quarrel I had overheard that night.

"It had been growing," she explained lamely. "It was because he was dependent on me. I didn't give him a chance." She flushed and hurried on as if she had learned it all by heart and had to say it right to the very end. "That night after Mrs. Carnby left we discussed it seriously. We didn't quarrel. My husband argued that it was his sense of inadequacy that kept me from respecting him. We decided that we still loved each other enough to try and start again. But we knew we couldn't if the situation remained as before. He thought it over and outlined a plan. At first I thought it was crazy, then I decided it might be a good thing to try it. Lately I'd been too hard on his suggestions. I thought it would help him if I played up to him. His plan was to go off by himself, without any help from me. He wasn't to communicate with me till he had found something to do—or he was to come back and admit he was a failure.

"After all," she finished, with a flare-up of her old nastiness, "it wasn't much of a risk. God knows, there are enough jobs!"

Unfortunately for her story, Bill Raymond had left, as the sheriff put it, "traveling uncommonly light for a man who intended to be gone some time." As far as they could discover, none of his clothes were missing, and few, if any, of his private belongings. It was pretty evident he hadn't left High Hollow that night, and he hadn't intended to.

There was a kind of madness in her as she saw the net closing around her. "But I thought—" she stammered, "I thought he would send for his things when— He must have walked to the station with just a bundle. He said he couldn't bear parting. That he would just slip off some day, and that I was to understand. Don't you see? I didn't really think he'd do it. I

didn't think he'd have the guts. I was almost glad when I found him gone in the morning." She kept on repeating the senseless stuff.

The sheriff was a bit tired of it, too. "Look here, Mrs. Raymond! That was your story when he was still missing. It was all right for then. But now you'll have to change it. It doesn't fit the facts. His body is here. He didn't walk to any station, and you know it! You were even told that he hadn't bought a ticket out of this station. It didn't bother you then. Why? Because you knew he was lying under that barn floor! That is your husband's body, Mrs. Raymond. You know it!"

"Yes," she said hopelessly. "Somebody else killed him, Sheriff, not me." She sounded as if she herself didn't expect anyone to believe it.

"*You* killed him!" the sheriff said. "It was in your mind for weeks. Enough people have heard you say things that add up to a pretty firm determination to get him out of the way."

"No!" she cried out. "No! I thought about it sometimes. I mean—just like anybody might when they were angry. I thought about it, but I didn't do it! I didn't!" But she'd said the wrong thing. There wasn't anybody in East Huntley who *ever* thought about killing people when they were mad at them. We didn't understand a woman who thought it was natural. We were afraid of her.

Dr. Bailey made his report. Death was caused by a sharp blow on the temple. As to the weapon—well, many tools around a farm could have been used, even a sharp rock.

She was brought to trial. Such a thing had never happened in the history of East Huntley. It was a fair, careful trial. They went over the ground until we all knew it by heart. They gave her every chance. But they couldn't get away from the fact that she hadn't reported her husband's absence, even when she was told that he hadn't left town by train.

There was a nasty surprise waiting for me in that trial. It was about that letter that had told the sheriff where the body was. It had been found by Soupy Dean in his miniature cave,

a tiny, deep hole in the rocks above the falls. Soupy had discovered the cave the year before, and he kept all his little treasures there. Soupy's all right, but he isn't very bright.

How long the letter had been there was hard to say. It's not an easy climb to the cave, and nobody ever went there except Soupy. He'd been on his yearly visit to his relatives in Yarmouth. He'd been gone several weeks. When he came back he went right for his hiding place. He was astonished to find the letter, but he's a good boy and he delivered it to the sheriff. If Soupy hadn't been away we might have known much sooner.

But there was more about that letter, and it concerned me. The message was pasted on a piece of the stationery Camilla gave me last Christmas! My name had been cut off the top. The words had been clipped out of a pile of old detective magazines I had stored in the woodshed. A hired man had left them, and I used them with kindling to light fires.

I earned a few respectful glances in the courtroom, because people thought I had suspected the truth first!

The days of the trial passed and the town grew hard and angry. What struck me was that they seemed to hate Evelyn Raymond, not so much for killing her husband as for bringing this disgrace on the town, and making them sit in judgment on a woman.

Her defense was hopeless. She saw it was, and she got nasty and hysterical toward the end. That didn't help her with the jury. The day she was convicted my heart went out to her. She stood there, her eyes staring and glazed with fear. I didn't expect her to live to go to the scaffold, but she did. All night before her execution I couldn't sleep. I doubt if any of the jurors were sleeping either. We knew she was guilty, and yet it's a terrible thing to hang a woman, even for cold-blooded murder.

If she had changed her story in the beginning—said she'd killed him accidentally or in self-defense, and that she'd lied because she was afraid—they might have sent her to jail. But that woman was stubborn!

All she could tell us was that stupid story about his going

off to make a man of himself. Once she turned on me. She said I must have done it, and then left the note pointing to her. The community didn't like that. The last spark of pity for her vanished.

Life in East Huntley changed during the trial. We'd never been called upon to execute a murderer, and it did things to us. Even after she was buried, things didn't go back. People hated her memory because she had made them convict her. Folks got to thinking that if it can happen once, it can happen again. There was an uncomfortable feeling in the air.

It wasn't until fall that he came back. Thank God, I'll never have to meet such horror this side of the grave again!

I was walking on the road past High Hollow, going into town, when Ted Harmon's cab drove up and stopped right in front of the High Hollow gate. Ted lifted some bags out, and then stood there with his hands on the door as if he were afraid of what he was going to let out. His white, shocked face looked like death, and his mouth was working as if he wanted to say something and couldn't.

Then his fare got out, and I felt my body freeze.

It isn't true! I thought. *It can't be. Look again, Bessie Carnby!* But I knew!

He'd changed some, but not very much. After all, it had only been a matter of months. He looked stronger and more weathered, but it was Bill Raymond in the flesh!

He saw me and came right over, hand outstretched cordially. You could see in his face that he'd decided to be big and start off on the right foot with the old girl. Then he stopped and frowned.

"What's the matter?" he said. "You look ill, Mrs. Carnby. For that matter, everybody in town looks sick. Not a soul said a word to me when I got in." His voice changed. "What in God's name is the matter with you all?"

"Whatever part of the country you were in," I said, "you must have heard! Why didn't you come?"

He looked at me irritably. "Stop asking me riddles, Mrs. Camby. I couldn't have heard anything. I joined the Merchant Marine. I've been in ports all over the globe. . . . Look, whatever's bothering you can wait, can't it? After all, I'm pretty eager to see my wife!"

My tongue was suddenly thick and dry. I caught his sleeve and held him until I could talk. "Don't," I whispered at last. "She's not there!"

He raised his head and looked at the house in surprise. God knows, it looked desolate enough! Nobody had been near it since she was hanged.

"Didn't she even wait?" he said wildly. "Didn't she have *faith* in me?"

Something about the words and the way he said them reminded me of a play. I looked at him closely.

"She's dead!" I shouted at him. "Dead and buried! Hanged for your murder!"

He staggered against the pile of new suitcases, and Ted and I helped him to sit down on the grass by the side of the road. Then we stared at each other, speechless. People were beginning to drift out from the town. They were all shocked. Nobody knew what to do.

After all, in a way we were all guilty of her death. It was horrible for every last one of us. That silly story she'd told had been true! Though, heaven knows, nobody but a fool like Bill Raymond would have thought of doing anything like it. He'd gone off to prove himself a man, and he'd taken his first real chance. They checked his story, of course, and it was true. He'd been to Russia!

I don't know when it started. Little whispers here and there that I didn't pay much attention to at first. Then I began to feel the open hostility. Folks started saying that I'd known a lot to send that pasted message. If I knew it innocently, why hadn't I come out like a Christian woman and said it? Why had I used Soupy Dean as a go-between?

Then, as you see, they had to explain the body that had

found under the barn. They remembered Ephraim Judge and how I had quarreled with him the day he disappeared. They remembered that his body hadn't been found. And wasn't it true that I had hated the Raymonds enough to drag the body up and bury it under their barn? *Buzz, buzz*—the poisonous whispers went around my ears like wasps.

Bit by bit, the whole town turned on me. You can see why they were so eager. They had unjustly executed a woman, and they were looking for someone to bear the fault for them. Hadn't I told the sheriff where to dig? It didn't help much to tell them that I was dying by inches, and where would I get the strength to dig a hole? They didn't believe me.

Camilla came home to me, frightened out of her wits, poor girl. And then Bill Raymond did a strange thing. He began to protect me from the wrath of the town. I was old and ill, he said. What I was suffering was punishment enough. *He* excused *me*. He stood between me and the people I had known all my life!

Camilla began to depend on him, to lean on him. If I tried to say anything, she looked at me as if I were a vicious old woman trying to blacken the character of a man who had forgiven me a dreadful crime. The winter passed like a white hell. Most of it I spent in bed, dying.

But now, tomorrow, at High Hollow, there's to be a wedding! That weak, forgiving man—that *murderer*—is going to marry my niece! Sunnyfield and High Hollow and Camilla will *all* belong to him—and I'll be dead!

You see, I know I didn't put that note in the rock hole. I know I didn't kill Ephraim Judge. I don't believe anybody killed him. He died, just as we thought, by falling and hitting his head. But he didn't fall into the pool. Bill Raymond found him. It gave him what he needed to carry out his great idea—a corpse! He buried Ephraim under the floor with just the right amount of lime. He'd practiced on the calf to find out how much. I think, now, that he purposely let the animal into the wrong pasture.

Then he put the button from Evelyn's jacket, and the match-box—both conveniently metal, you remember—into the grave. He had to make identification sure.

Then he set the stage. As often as he could, he worked her up into a rage so that she'd threaten him where someone would overhear. That last quarrel I overheard was managed for my benefit.

After I left that night he changed his tune. Suddenly he was all remorse. I can fairly see him! He got the poor woman to swallow his story. He left the note where it wouldn't be delivered until Soupy got back. He had to be far afield by that time. Also, the quicklime had to have a chance to do its work!

Late at night he crept out of the house and started on the long walk to West Huntley, taking nothing and wearing his old work clothes. He hopped a freight train in the junction yards. He sailed with the Merchant Marine, so that he could truly say the trial news hadn't reached him. But the rottenest bit was that story he left with her—so weak, so impossible. He knew it would hang her!

There it is! He didn't kill Ephraim—he only borrowed his body. He didn't kill his wife—he got the town to do it for him.

There's nothing I can do. They're all convinced that I did the whole terrible thing. Nobody speaks to me any more. Only Bill Raymond! He comes in every night to my bedside with a sanctimonious smile and a voice like butter. The town admires him for his saintly nature. Camilla adores him!

I think and I think and I think. The walls stare back at me. The recipes lie around my bed, but that's just so they'll think I'm occupied. I'm working out a plan, and it mustn't go wrong. The town will be very careful. Next time they won't be in any hurry to convict a murderer, so my plan will have to be perfect.

The pain has been terrible lately, but I make myself bear it. I've accumulated an immense dose of morphine tablets. Annie gives them to me at certain times, but she doesn't watch to see if I really swallow them. People don't care what I do any more. I decided long ago, when I first knew I had this, that I would

kill myself when it got too bad. Now it's just a question of doing it in the right way!

I rang for Annie a while ago and gave her a letter to the sheriff. I told her to deliver it in person and not to tell anyone. I allowed the silly goose to think it was a confession. She'll deliver it, all right! But it isn't the confession. It's a letter begging for protection against Bill Raymond who, I said, is not as forgiving as he acts. I wrote that I have seen him abstracting morphine tablets from my bottle, that I know he is planning to murder me! I added that I know too much about how his wife came to die, and that he is afraid I am going to disinherit Camilla. That should do it, I think.

In a few minutes Bill Raymond will open the door and come in to say good night in his revolting way. Suddenly I shall need my heart medicine. I'll ask him to pour it. It won't be hard to drop the tablets in when he isn't looking. I'll make him hold the glass to my lips.

The morphine is kept across the room in a cabinet that I can't even reach. They'll discover that I died of morphine poisoning. They'll want to know how I got it. The sheriff will have my letter. He'll look for fingerprints, and he'll find them. There will be traces of morphine in the bottom of that glass.

I hope Bill Raymond thinks of the woman at High Hollow when he comes to trial. I hope he sees her yellow hair and her green eyes as he goes out to be hanged.

Note: This manuscript was found long after Mrs. Carnby's death, and the trial and conviction of William Raymond as her murderer. It was brought to my office by her niece, Camilla Raymond, a strange-looking girl with wide, staring eyes. She says she found it in the middle of her aunt's collection of recipes.

Signed, WINSTON THOMAS,
County Attorney

Press Agent for Murder

Every actress in the Hollywood land of make-believe depends upon her continuing popularity for success or failure, and she is in a constant struggle to have herself promoted wherever and whenever possible. Reverse the situation, then, and visualize an actress who wishes herself to be torn down in the eyes of the public. That would be complete madness, of course, and even the experienced press agent Ted Cain considered it thus, until he discovered those articles which only a demented mind would wish to possess. . . . A. Boyd Correll is a scenario writer for one of the major studios, and he works a good deal of local color as well as action into his plots.

THE life of a Hollywood press agent isn't all sweetness and light, regardless of the fees the good ones get, and I'm supposed to rate as a good one. In one of my weak moments I had signed up Betty Hudson, that simpering little package of curves and dimples without benefit of brains, who had been teetering for a couple of years between unimportant character parts in A pictures and supporting leads in the B's. She had managed to convince me that I could give her the necessary push that would land her in the right back yard, so here I was doing my best to write some plausible story that Winchell, Hopper, or Parsons might use.

I was in the middle of a bit of fiction about how Betty got up every morning and fixed her mother's breakfast, when Mac, my Girl Friday in the front office, buzzed the inner phone. I must have snarled a little.

"Mac," I said, "so help me, I love you. But if you don't keep this phone quiet until I'm through selling my soul to the devil

for the price this Hudson dame is paying me, I'm coming out there and throttle your Southern accent."

Mac said, "My, my!" and then went on, "There's a lady on the wire who I believe you'll want to talk to."

"I don't know any ladies," I told her. "And I'm not talking to anybody less than Gary Cooper or Joy Rains, so tell your lady I'm dead." I smacked the receiver onto its base and turned back to the typewriter.

The phone buzzed immediately. Mac seemed sore about something. "Ted Cain," she said, "you've got the worst manners of any flack that ever lied to an editor." I heard her flip the switch that opened the outside line. "Here's Mr. Cain, Miss Rains."

I did a double take, pulled the receiver from my ear, stared at it, then slapped it back. Joy Rains calling, and Joy, as you well know, is Glamour City's top star. You remember, she copped the best actress Academy Oscar last year for her portrayal of the scullery wench in "Dark Years." Why she was phoning me, a press agent, I couldn't figure out. The fan mags, as well as the newspapers, welcomed any copy about her with open arms. My Hollywood suspicion was aroused, however. Quite possibly she wanted me to tout up some stock girl she was befriending, so I went easy on the greeting.

"Yes, Miss Rains?" I said.

She didn't bother about using that low, vibrant tone in her voice that packs them into theaters to see her latest opus. She was strictly business. "Mr. Cain, I understand yours is one of the leading publicity agencies."

I grinned into the phone, but managed a casual, "Yes." I didn't think it necessary to tell her that Mac and I constituted the agency.

She went on, "Then I want to employ you."

I became wary. Here comes the stock girl, I thought. "I've got a pretty full stable, Miss Rains," I said. "Whom do you want publicized?"

"Why, myself, of course!" She seemed surprised at my question. "But if you already have more clients than you can handle—"

I interrupted in a hurry. With Joy Rains as a client, I would be on top of Hollywood. Instead of begging editors, I'd have them begging me. Just the opposite of a client like Betty Hudson. Copy on Betty could get a flack kicked out of a newspaper office, and his future blurbs on legitimate show people would be eyed with suspicion. But with exclusive stories about Joy, I could write my own ticket.

"Of course I can handle you," I told her real fast. "And I can practically guarantee to get anything you want published, so long as it's about you."

She said, "Good! I'll hold you to that. Do I sign a contract or something?"

"Yes," I answered, "but that can come later. You've got my word that I'll handle you, and I'm sure—ha ha—that I can depend on Joy Rains sticking to her verbal agreement." I was so tickled at getting her as a client, I was acting silly.

She said, "Then it's settled. I want you to begin today." Her voice suddenly took on a cold, brittle tone, each word spaced as though accented by a pounding fist. "Get a series of news items started about me that will tear down my reputation as an actress, destroy the public's so-called adoration for me, and make any producer shy away from the name of Joy Rains when he's casting a picture!" I heard what sounded like a sob at the other end of the line, but when she spoke again, that fist-pounding was still evident. "Do you understand?"

I was gazing at the ceiling while she talked, and it suddenly seemed to swoop down, rise again, shiver, then regain its rightful place above me. My feet, which had been on the desk, hit the floor with a bang, and I yelled into the phone, "What?"

"I'm sure you heard me, Mr. Cain." Now her voice was flat, unemotional, as though she were deathly tired. "And I have your word that you will do this for me."

"Godamighty!" I cried wildly. "I promised to handle you,

but I had no idea of such insanity as this. Do you realize what you are saying?"

"I do, Mr. Cain."

"But it's crazy," I sputtered. "I can't! I— Your studio would sue me for every dime I've got." I was beginning to feel crazy myself.

"I'm a free agent, Mr. Cain," she said. "I'll give you a written release, exonerating you of any liability."

"I'll need more than that, and I want to talk to you!" A sudden thought struck me. "Pardon the question, Miss Rains, but you haven't been . . . uh . . . you know, bending the elbow?"

"I never drink," she snapped. "Can you come over here for the release at four o'clock? I'm at Panamint Studios, Sound Stage Eight. I'll call the gate and have them pass you through."

I said, "I'll be there," hung up, and bawled for Mac. My desk clock showed three-thirty.

Mac came in like a cloud, a lovely, rose-tinted spring cloud. Her ruffled blouse was like a splash of white carnations against the dove-gray of her man-tailored suit. Her sherry-brown hair rolled up in a shining halo toward the crown of her head, and her nose also turned up, but stopped just in time to be cute as all get-out.

"Mac," I yelled, "Joy Rains has gone stark, raving mad, and she tricked me into climbing on the merry-go-round with her!" I got up and began pacing. "She wants me"—I started ticking off on my fingers—"first, to write articles about her to wreck her reputation as an actress; second, kill the fans' adoration of her; third, fix it so that she's poison to every producer. She's nuts, I tell you! Have we got a file on her?"

"Yes," said Mac, "and stop shouting." She went out and returned almost at once with a folder which she put on my desk.

I flipped it open. It was a collection of newspaper clippings, all pertaining to Joy Rains. We keep a file of the prominent stars, whether or not they are clients. I skimmed through it hurriedly, and found that Joy was born in Virginia of wealthy parents, won a beauty contest, and had been a Powers model in

New York for three years. Another contest had brought her to Hollywood with a short-term contract. She'd clicked at once, signed up to split honors with the star of the picture of the century of that year. From then on, she rode the crest of the wave.

I checked the gossip columns for any dirt about her, but could find none. She had married Jock Hannon, the big horse breeder, two years ago. According to all local reports, they were quite happy together, although six months ago Hannon had lost his fortune, which was horses, in a fire that destroyed the stables on his ranch near Santa Anita.

Nothing I could find suggested any friction in her domestic or professional life. I glanced up at Mac and shrugged.

"Maybe she's discovered temperament," Mac said. She had parked herself on my desk and sat there, one foot swinging. "You know, according to all reports, she's the only star who hasn't burst forth with it at some time or another."

I snorted. "Temperament doesn't take that line. They always scream how good they are and how bad they're being treated." I got up and reached for my hat from the top of the file cabinet. "I'm going out to the Panamint lot and see her. I may phone you later for help."

Mac stood up and kissed me lightly on the cheek. "If you need help, you better get it from the psychopathic ward of General Hospital. We haven't stocked straitjackets for over a year now."

At five minutes before four, I gave my name to the guard at the Panamint entrance gate. He handed me a pass, and said Joy had phoned to let me through.

Sound Stage Eight was in a new building, just completed. The set shooting there was an interior, showing the first eight rows of seats in a country church. The pulpit, a simple pine rostrum, was framed in the background of a stained-glass window. On the set, several people were idling away the time. Two carpenters and an electrician had a crap game going on the rise in

front of the seats, banking the dice against the base of the pulpit. Four men, who I found later to be an assistant director, a cameraman, his assistant, and a sound mixer, sat in front of the huge camera behind the seats, playing gin rummy.

In the second row of benches was Jack Candor, the director. He had his legs hooked over the back of the seat in front of him, and he seemed to be asleep. Alongside him was Ace Montana, Panamint's Western star. Ace was reading a comic magazine. In his lap was a sack of gumdrops, and he was popping them into his mouth with unconscious regularity. Ace was a handsome, happy moron, an ex-client of mine whom I had press-agented from a job as a horse-opera extra to his present spot. His features were falconish and his coarse bronze hair was curly. His face was bronzed, too, and his pale-blue eyes were framed in laugh wrinkles. He glanced up from "Dick Tracy," spotted me, and gave a hoot of welcome that sounded like a cow bellowing. Jack Candor jerked awake, glared at Ace, then saw me as I walked over.

I greeted, "Hi, fellows. What've you got here, a sit-down strike?"

Candor's natural expression was as sour as Ned Sparks eating a dill pickle dunked in alum. He was tall, with a whippy figure, his slimness accentuated by the high-waisted slacks he wore, and the tight-fitting pullover sweater. His head, with its thin, scraggly black hair, narrowed startlingly above his ears as though it had been squeezed in a vise when he was a baby. He glanced at his wristwatch.

"Nope, just getting ready to shoot a couple of retakes," he said. "The call was for four o'clock." He looked over his shoulder toward the sound camera and shouted to his assistant, "Hey, Ozzie! Go call Joy. Tell her it's four o'clock." He turned back to me. "I hope she's got her face repaired after her battle."

I pricked up my ears. "Battle?" I asked.

Candor nodded. "Yeah, a honey. Jock Hannon, her husband, was over to see her and they both were screaming like a couple of twelve o'clock whistles."

I began to smell a motive for Joy's crazy call. "Where was this, and when?"

Candor nodded his head toward the stained-glass window. "Her dressing room is parked behind there—she'd come over about three-fifteen to make up for some close-ups we're shooting. Hannon practically followed her in. Some of the crew were here, wandering around the stage, and they could hear Joy and Hannon having some hot words in the dressing room. It ended by Hannon coming out in a hell of a hurry and beating it for the exit. Ace tried to stop him." He grinned at the Western star. "The dope's in love with Joy."

Ace reddened and almost choked on a gumdrop in his effort to swallow so that he could talk. "I am not! She's a friend of mine, that's all. Hannon's a dirty coyote. If I'd known he hit her, I'd of socked him one. After he left, I heard Joy cryin' and I went in. She had a bruise alongside her temple and she was tryin' to cover it over with grease paint."

"Did she say he struck her?" I asked.

Ace shook his head. "Naw. She's too much a lady. Said she bumped it on the side of her dresser when she leaned down to pick up her shoes." He spat disgustedly onto the floor. "I shoulda socked him anyway when he called her a neurotic. What's a neurotic?"

I was about to tell him, when a yell^o of terror came blasting from behind the stained-glass window.

Candor said, "God, that's Ozziel!" and started sprinting for the side of the set. I followed with Ace close on my heels. We circled the upright flats which formed the church walls, and came to the back of the set. Directly behind was a small, square, boxlike portable dressing room. The door was open and from it came a blaze of light into the semidarkness of the huge stage. Candor got to the door first and came to a halt with a quick intake of breath. He said, strangling, "Good God!" From behind, I looked over his shoulder.

Ozzie, the assistant director, stood with his back against a

wall. He had a hand jammed against his mouth, and his eyes were wide with horror. I followed his gaze and saw her.

From one of the two-by-four beams which braced the ceiling of the dressing room, a rope stretched taut. One end had been secured to a large chrome ring in the wall, attached there to hang clothes through. From the other end slowly swayed the body of Joy Rains. An overturned chair rested beneath her.

Ace pushed through them and saw the body. An awful cry escaped his lips as he rushed between Candor and myself. He wrapped a powerful arm around the woman's hips and slashed at the rope with a knife which appeared from nowhere. He carried the body as though it weighed only a feather, and laid it tenderly on a lounge.

Some of the stage crew were staring through the open door and I pushed it shut. Ozzie had got his hand away from his mouth, but he looked as though he might scream any moment. Candor merely stood in the room, wetting his lips with his tongue.

I said, "We'd better call the police, Jack. Where's the nearest phone?"

Candor flipped his hands about. "O-over at the Writers' Building. They haven't got them in here yet." He looked once more at the body of Joy, and his sour expression seemed tinged with green. He pulled at my coat lapels. "Ted—Ted! I've got to get out of here. I . . . I feel sick. I'll call them." He stumbled blindly to the door and slammed it behind him.

I walked over and put my hand on Ace's shoulder. He looked up at me with tears he didn't try to hide. "She's dead, Mr. Cain."

I nodded. "I know. I knew as soon as I saw her. You'd better come away. There'll be a formal investigation, and it's best to leave things as they were."

He got up slowly, brushing a hamlike fist under his nose. I turned to Ozzie.

"I knocked on the door, Mr. Cain," he said, "and didn't get an answer. I knocked again, then went in—I thought maybe she

had gone out onto the stage somewhere—and found her hanging there.” He sank down into a chair and ran a hand slowly across his face.

I glanced at the dresser, squinted my eyes, then stared. Joy Rains must have been insane. Lying there, in neat array, were a lock of hair, tied daintily with a ribbon to the shin bone of some animal, a goldfish, carefully cut in two, and the two halves reversed so that the tail touched the gaping mouth, and about one inch of a fifty-dollar bill, the outside edge of it clean and new, the inner edge charred by fire. Articles which, obviously, only a person with a psychopathic mind would gather together and keep. Beside them lay a brush and comb, nail buffer, and other toilet articles a woman uses.

I sat down on a low stool and waited for the police. I decided that I would tell my story about the crazy job Joy wanted me to do, and then get back to the office. The whole thing was giving me a case of the creeps.

At last Lieutenant Tom Brenlow, from L. A. Homicide, arrived. He and I were friends from back to the time I was a police reporter on the *Independent* before going into publicity work. With him was a Dr. Page, deputy out of the coroner’s office. The lieutenant made a careful survey of the small room, taking in the overturned chair and the rope, and ending up with staring at the three bizarre objects on the dresser.

He whistled when he saw them. “The setup is perfect for a suicide,” he said. “And if you ask me, the dame was crazy.” Then he shoosed everyone out except the doctor. He followed us onto the set, where we took seats on the church benches.

“Routine questioning,” he grunted, pulling a notebook out of his pocket. “Who discovered the body?”

Ozzie held up his hand, jerked it down, and said, “I did.”

Brenlow studied him a moment from under shaggy eyebrows. “Name?”

“Ozzie—I mean, Osborne Williams.” He explained how he had gone to the dressing room, knocked on the door, and found the body.

The lieutenant licked the stub of a pencil and wrote slowly.

My gaze wandered to the side of the set, and then my blood seemed to freeze. I could feel the hairs on my head tingle and the scalp draw tight. The cigarette in my mouth dangled and dropped into my lap, but I felt powerless to move.

From behind the benches, and walking straight toward the altar, was Joy Rains!

I must have reached over and grabbed Ace's arm, because he knocked the smoldering cigarette from my lap and said, "What the hell!"

All I could do was nod toward the apparition. Ace looked at her and muttered, "Yeah. Purty, ain't she? That's Ozzie's sister. She's double and stand-in for Joy. Name's Sue Williams."

I let out my breath with a *whoosh*. The girl was so startlingly like Joy that they could have been twins. She walked on down the aisle, then turned and smiled at Candor.

"Sorry I'm late, Jack." She glanced around the group questioningly. "What's the conference?"

Her brother reached up to pull her down beside him. "Joy Rains killed herself. Now, take it easy!" he added, as the girl swayed.

I leaned over and helped her to a seat. Ozzie explained rapidly what had happened. Lieutenant Brenlow had been standing patiently, watching them. Now he cleared his throat.

"Who was the last to see Miss Rains alive?" he asked.

Ace stood up, like a little boy in school called on to recite his geography. "Me, I think. She'd had a fight with her husband and I heard her cryin'—"

Brenlow interrupted, "Fight?"

"Yeah. The dirty coyote. He'd smacked her, too, only Joy said she bumped her head accidentally." He told of finding the star applying grease paint to the bruise.

Brenlow said, "Hannon's been notified. He should be here any minute. We'll let him explain that."

Even as he spoke, Jock Hannon came running from the sound stage entrance. His sun-tanned face was drained of color,

and there was agony in his eyes. He was a big man, the kind you would expect to love horses and outdoor life, and his haggard face was hard to reconcile with his otherwise apparent robust health.

"Where is she?" he shouted, as he reached our group.

The lieutenant walked to meet him. "The doctor's with her now. You'll have to wait a few minutes." He steered him toward one of the benches. "I'm getting statements from these people—routine matter. I hope you'll help me."

Hannon nodded dazedly. "Yes, of course. But why should she kill herself?"

Ace, at my side, tensed, and I could hear him mutter under his breath. He was glaring at the star's husband.

"That's what we would like to find out, Mr. Hannon," said the lieutenant. "I understand you and your wife had an argument in her dressing room."

Hannon waved a deprecating hand. "Nothing of any consequence. I think it started out as a practical joke, but after she thought about it, she . . . er . . . well, denied having done it," he ended somewhat lamely.

Ace suddenly shot up from his seat. "You hit her, you dirty coyote!" he yelled.

Hannon looked at him in amazement. "What in the devil—"

Lieutenant Brenlow stormed between them. "Quiet! I'm conducting this investigation." He turned to Jock Hannon.

"Would you tell me, please, just what this practical joke was?"

"Why, I suppose so," Hannon said nervously. "She called me at the house and said she was getting awfully tired." He hesitated before going on. "Honestly, if I didn't know her so well, I would swear she had been drinking. She said she wished she were dead! And hung up." He put a trembling hand to his forehead. "Naturally, I came straight down here, but she denied having even called me. I was upset, I guess, and I told her she was getting neurotic from this religious picture she's working on. That led to words and I left in a huff. That's all."

Dr. Page came in then and I heard him talking to Brenlow. "Died of strangulation all right," he said, "but there's a bruise on the right side of her head which I can't account for."

My mind started racing. Hannon had received his call, apparently around three o'clock; I had received mine at three-thirty, just a few minutes before she died. At least, she died between three-thirty and four o'clock, which was when Ozzie discovered the body. Candor had said she'd come onto the set at three-fifteen. My hair started crawling again. Something smelled of murder.

I got up and motioned to Lieutenant Brenlow to follow me. Off the set, and out of earshot of the others, I told him of the call Joy had made to me.

"So what?" he asked.

I said, "There's something screwy about it."

The big lieutenant slapped me on the shoulder and laughed. "Sure it's screwy. Even her old man out there says it's screwy, only he said she sounded drunk. The dame went nuts, I tell you. You see those things on her dresser? A dead fish. Holy cow! And a hank of hair tied to a soup bone! She didn't have to start burning up fifty-dollar bills to convince me she was screwy."

"That's just it," I answered earnestly. "The act was a little bit overplayed."

Brenlow sobered, then squinted an eye. "You mean she may have planted those things there to make her look crazy before she hung herself?"

I said, "Yeah. And then again you might have the continuity wrong."

Brenlow's eyes popped. "What the hell! You mean she hung herself, and then stuck her little playthings on the dresser?"

"I mean she might have been hung, and those gimmicks placed there to make her look crazy."

Brenlow puckered his lips in a whistle. "But why—" he began, when I interrupted.

"For a starter," I pointed out, "a will written by a person

proved to be insane when he or she wrote it, isn't worth the paper it's drawn up on."

Brenlow said, "By God! And Jock Hannon lost every cent he had about six months ago!" He started for the set.

"Take it easy," I advised. "That's just a suggestion. And, anyway, Hannon was supposed to have left the sound stage before she died. Ace Montana claimed to have talked with Joy after he left."

Brenlow turned on me savagely. "Hell! They might be working together. That phony scrap Montana tried to pull looked fishy to me. When did he arrive on the set?"

I told him Ace was there when I arrived at four o'clock, but that he could find out from the guard at the sound stage entrance. When a picture is shooting, he's supposed to check everyone in or out.

The guard had his list of people who entered the sound stage, and he willingly gave Brenlow the information he wanted. Ace, Jack Candor and his assistant, Ozzie Williams, had arrived shortly after three. Joy had arrived at three-fifteen, followed by Hannon. The two carpenters, the electrician, the cameraman and his assistant, and the sound technician had all come in a group at five minutes of four. The guard had me down as arriving at four o'clock, and Sue Williams, Ozzie's sister, had checked in at four-twenty-five.

Brenlow turned to me after he had written down this information. "That lets out Miss Williams, the two grips, and the juicer, as well as the cameraman, his assistant, and the sound mixer." He turned to the guard again.

"What time did Mr. Hannon leave?" he asked.

The guard studied his list. "I've got him down as leaving at three-forty-five."

"The hell you say!" Brenlow swung on me. "I thought you said he left before three-thirty!"

"That's what Ace and Candor both said," I told him. "At least, they told me he was out of the dressing room after being in

there only a few minutes fighting with his wife. They had gone in at three-fifteen."

Brenlow told the guard that no one was to leave, and headed back to the set. "I'm finding out who belongs here and who doesn't," I heard him mutter.

I stopped long enough to ask the guard a question. "Did Miss Rains go out after once arriving?"

He shook his head and I turned and followed Brenlow. That settled it. Everything was phony except Joy's death, and that, I was sure, was a phony suicide.

The lieutenant started by questioning Jock Hannon.

"You were with your wife how long in the dressing room?"

Hannon said, "About five minutes, I should say."

"And then you immediately left the sound stage?"

"Well, not right away. I stopped to kind of cool off, even thought of going back and patching things up. Anyway, I wandered around the other end of the building. There were some props—stuffed horses and things—stored there and I was interested in seeing them."

"Stuffed horses?" asked Brenlow.

Jack Candor interrupted to explain, "That's some property from a picture we finished last week. It was a Western—Ace was in it. The script called for a flashback to pioneering days and a shot of a massacred wagon train. Dead horses and things lying about."

Brenlow said, "Bones, too?"

"Bones? Oh, sure. Bleached skeletons, rusted wagon wheels, arrowheads stuck in tail gates, and stuff like that."

Brenlow grunted and turned to Ace. "You in this picture, this church business?"

Ace shook his head. "No. I just came over to watch. Joy Rains was an awfully good friend of mine."

"Was her husband here a good friend also?"

Ace glowered at Hannon. "I hate to admit it, but he was."

Lieutenant Brenlow pulled at his lower lip, slowly shifting his gaze from one person to another. I knew what was on his

mind. He was trying to get his teeth into a motive. His roving eyes came to rest on the director.

"Was Miss Rains insured by the studio?"

Candor said, "Yes, of course. We always insure an actor or actress when a picture is started. Just for such an emergency as this."

"Will her death cause the picture to be thrown out?"

Candor answered, "No. We've done practically all the close-ups. Sue Williams can be used to complete it, and dub in the dialogue."

Brenlow's interest picked up. "Then whether or not the film makes money, the studio will profit?"

Candor's eyebrows lifted. "What are you getting at?"

"Just what I said. If this picture should be a flop, the studio would still be ahead of the game with the insurance money they collect for her death. Was there any chance of its being a flop?"

The director looked very unhappy. "I'm afraid I can't say. You should see Gold, the producer."

Brenlow pounded his hand with a fist. "To hell with Gold! I'm asking you. You directed it."

Candor pulled at his collar. "Well, frankly, yes. It was an experiment in a way. Highly religious, without any honkatonk to appeal to the masses. It was Miss Rains's last picture for Panamint under her present contract, and the studio wanted to find out, before taking up her option, whether she could do this sort of thing."

Brenlow was almost chortling, and I wanted to tell him he was crazy. Panamint was one of the major studios on the West Coast. They didn't go around killing stars for their insurance. The lieutenant went on:

"Could anyone in the building have gone into Miss Rains's room without being noticed?"

Candor nodded. "I suppose so. Visits are not uncommon."

Brenlow rubbed his hands and turned to Jock Hannon. "Are

you sure you didn't return to your wife's dressing room before you left at three-forty-five?"

"Quite," answered Hannon. "There was a property man working there, and he can prove my statement."

"Ho," said Brenlow, and pulled at his lip again. Then he shot a question which I knew was a stab in the dark. "Does Ace Montana, who said you were a friend of his, owe you anything—money, for instance?"

Ace stood up belligerently. "What the hell has that got to do with Joy's death?" he demanded.

The lieutenant swung on him. "So you do owe him money?" he snapped.

"I do not!" the Western star shouted. "He hasn't got a dime of his own to begin with. I'll admit I borrowed money from Joy——"

Brenlow pounced. "Which now will have to be paid to Hannon!"

I jerked up my head and stared at the officer. I had been pulling strings together—information Brenlow had brought out, as well as what the guard at the gate had given. I yanked at the lieutenant's arm and dragged him, protesting, to the side of the set.

"What the hell are you doing?" he snarled. "I'm just getting a motive started and you act like you're still working for the *Independent*."

I said, "Take it easy. The case is solved. All you've got to do is prove Joy was murdered instead of being a suicide."

"Oh, yeah! Well, what the hell do you think I'm trying to do now? Organize a union?"

I said, "The rope, you dope. You're forgetting your basic training for homicide."

He looked at me and his face flushed. "Damned if I'm not," he muttered, and headed for the dressing room. I followed.

Dr. Page had covered Joy's face with a towel. Otherwise, the room was the same as when I had left it. The three objects were

still on the dresser; the rough, yellow rope still hung from across the ceiling beam.

Brenlow picked up the overturned chair, set it right, climbed up, and carefully unlooped the rope from the beam, not allowing it to touch the wood as he did so.

Together we examined it. The fibers on one side of the rope, between the chrome ring to which it was tied and the beam over which it had been thrown, pointed toward the end which had had the hangman's loop. Obviously, it had been pulled across the beam with a heavy weight on it, the weight being Joy's body. The hairy fibers from the cut end to where it touched the beam were undisturbed, all standing out straight. That settled it. Joy had been knocked unconscious. Then the rope had been slipped over her head, and she'd been hoisted up to die of strangulation. If she had hung herself, the fibers of the rope would not have been frayed except where they touched the beam.

Brenlow looked at me. "Well, it's proved. Now, who did it?"

I was examining the fragment of the burned fifty-dollar bill. I said, "Bring in her husband, Candor, Ozzie Williams and his sister, and Ace, and let me do the talking."

Brenlow eyed me sourly, but grunted an agreement. We went out and herded them in.

"Cain here," he said, "has got something to say."

They looked at me expectantly.

"Joy Rains was murdered," I announced flatly, and watched them.

Hannon's gaze shot swiftly to his dead wife, then back to me. He opened his mouth to say something, then closed it. Ace sprang to his feet. He grabbed my coat lapels and started shaking. "Who did it? I'll kill him!"

I said, "Sit down. You'll know soon enough." I pointed to the objects on the dresser. "These were planted here by the murderer to make it appear that Joy was insane, to make plausible her suicide. But she was murdered, and the motive was jealousy and—shall I say, ambition, Miss Williams?"

Sue Williams' mouth opened slowly as her face drained of color. Her jaw worked as though she were trying to speak, but no words came out. She looked frantically at her brother.

Ozzie was on his feet, his face a flaming red. He dived for me and swung a haymaker, which I sidestepped easily. Brenlow pinned his arms behind him.

"Damn you!" Ozzie screamed. "What do you mean by talking to my sister that way?"

I said, "I mean, your sister wanted a chance to step into Joy Rains's shoes, and this was her chance. The studio would be forced to use her as a substitute for Joy to finish the picture. She could write her own ticket, probably demand a long-term contract."

"That's a lie!" he shouted. "It wouldn't have been necessary to get Joy out of the way. She told you over the phone that she wanted to——"

He suddenly snapped his mouth shut and terror crept into his eyes.

I laughed. "That clinches it. I didn't expect you to slip so soon. Yes, Sue Williams phoned me and said she was Joy, and wanted her reputation blasted, but you forgot in your excitement that I had said nothing about it. You are not supposed to know she phoned me." I spoke to Brenlow, "Frisk him and let me have his wallet."

The lieutenant obliged.

I took the wallet and went on talking. "When I found that Joy had not left the sound stage since she came in at three-fifteen, I knew she had not made that phone call. She couldn't because she supposedly made it at three-thirty, and there's no phone in this building. Candor had to go to the Writers' Building to call the police.

"My next job was to discover who had made it. Sue Williams was the answer. Candor said that she would be used to complete the picture, as well as dub in the dialogue. That meant that she could mimic Joy's voice. She made two calls, one to Hannon here and one to me. The reason was merely to

strengthen the evidence of Joy's insanity. What sane movie star would call a press agent and hire him to ruin her reputation?"

Ozzie was straining at the hold Brenlow had on his arms. "Lies!" he shouted. "Lies! You can't prove anything!"

I said, "Oh, I think I can. A person who murders for money doesn't go around burning fifty-dollar bills. I examined this piece of burned money and saw it had been cut from the whole bill with a pair of scissors."

I opened the wallet and pulled out several bills, and among them was about three-quarters of a fifty-dollar bank note. I looked at Ozzie.

"You might have been able to buy your life for fifty dollars, killer," I told him. "But, no. You knew that the bank would redeem a bill if at least two-thirds of it was intact, so you couldn't even part with that amount to get your sister into the big-pay brackets."

I handed the bill to Brenlow. "Here's your proof, pal," I said. "And there's your murderer all wrapped up. His sister is an accessory before the fact. I'm sure the police lab will show that this part of the fifty belongs to this burnt end."

I flipped him a salute and headed for the Writers' Building. I felt sick—sick of everything that had to do with films.

I found a phone and dialed Mac. "Listen, sweetheart," I said when I heard her answer, "how'd you like to marry——"

Mac interrupted, "Listen yourself, big shot. Betty Hudson has been yelling her head off because you haven't got her name in the papers yet. What'll I tell her?"

"Tell her," I started yelling, "that she can go take a long jump into the La Brea tar pits. And listen, you. I want to know how you'd like to marry a police reporter?"

Mac giggled. "Well, if his name happened to be Scoop Cain——"

I let out a whoop and started dialing the *Independent* office. I got my old boss on the phone. "Hey, you big lug!" I shouted. "This is Scoop Cain. I'll swap you the biggest story in Hollywood for my old job back. What do you say?"

The Case of the Sobbing Girl

Sergeant Mike Duval returns from Italy to discover his brother's wife slated to be executed for a crime even the prison matron refuses to believe she committed. Mike gets to the bottom of the deep puzzle high atop a Chicago skyscraper, where he hears the sobbing of a heartbroken girl. . . . The title is à la Erle Stanley Gardner and the writing is akin to that of Dashiell Hammett—all of which should be sufficient recommendation, without further comment.

IT WAS the first time I had ever been in a prison. I didn't like it. The warden's secretary started to tell me to go peddle my papers, looked at the triple bank of ribbons on my chest, and changed his mind.

"You earn those, Sergeant?" he demanded.

I told him that I hadn't found them in Cracker-Jack boxes, and repeated my request.

"And you don't know the girl?"

I told him the truth. I had never even seen a picture of her. All I was doing was carrying out Johnny's last request. Until I had gone to her former address that morning, I hadn't the least idea that she was in prison, let alone in the death house, slated to burn for murder.

He said, "It sounds screwy to me. But I'll see what the warden says."

He went into the inner office. I walked to the window. The square-jawed man in the battered hat, who had ridden down with me on the train, was talking to one of the guards on the wall. I imagined that he had picked me up at the girl's apartment. That had been about ten that morning.

The warden came to his office door. "Harris tells me that your name is Duval—Sergeant Mike Duval."

I said that was right.

"And you want to see Mona Ambler?"

That wasn't strictly the truth. There was more to it than that. But I wasn't going to talk—my only interest in the girl was keeping the promise I had made to Johnny.

"Yes," I said. I wondered what kind of a run-around this was.

The warden considered a moment, then invited me into his office and offered me a chair. "Suppose you tell me all about it, Sergeant."

There wasn't much to tell. I told them what there was. Johnny was my kid brother. He had met the girl on his last leave in the States. They had been married, planning big things, like kids do. But they hadn't had much time. His leave had been canceled. In Sicily he had received a letter from her asking how about a dependent's allowance.

"This was how long ago?" the warden asked.

"The letter came about six months ago," I told him. "But Johnny hadn't been in the States for over a year and a half." He nodded, and I added, "The letter said she had had a child—a boy."

He built a temple of his fingers. "So?"

"So Johnny got killed in the landing at Anzio. But before he died, he asked if I'd take care of her and the kid. I said I would."

The warden said it was the damndest thing he had ever heard of—that no mention of a child had been made at her trial. I couldn't figure that, but I let it go.

The warden's name was Kane. He suggested, "Suppose we go see Mona."

He led the way down a long, narrow stone corridor that smelled of antiseptic. Every two hundred feet or so, a guard had to open steel doors to let us through. While we were crossing a large stone yard toward a little separate building, he asked if I was familiar with the case.

I told him I wasn't. The girl—even her name—meant nothing to me.

"She's earned the chair, Sergeant," he said. "She lured a poor stupe of a wholesale jeweler up to her hotel room and shot him in cold blood."

A matron opened the door of a small office. When Kane told her what we wanted, she said she would get the girl. "But I don't care how many confessions she signed," the matron added, "that girl never killed anyone."

Kane looked at his nails and said nothing.

I don't know what I'd expected, but the girl who came in wasn't it. She looked like a scared little kid wearing her mother's old-fashioned gold earrings.

"This is Sergeant Mike Duval, Johnny Duval's brother," the warden introduced me. "Johnny died in the landing at Anzio. The sergeant has brought back his last request—he wants to take care of the child. There was a child?"

She winced as if he had slapped her. When she spoke, her voice was low and throaty. "Yes. There was a child. There *is* a child."

He wanted to know where it was, and she told him that it was none of his business.

I cut in then and told her that she didn't need to worry, that I'd see that the kid was taken care of for life. All she had to do was name her lawyer and I'd make the arrangements with him.

She looked at me and seemed to quiet down.

"Let's get on with it," I suggested. "I've only got five days' leave. I've got to be back in New York on the twelfth."

I asked her her lawyer's name and address—and the kid's. She gave them to me. She asked a little about Johnny, and I told her. She cried a little, and when it was over I stood holding her hand like a fool. She looked at me and said suddenly, "Since Johnny went away, I'd forgotten guys like you still existed." And then she added with a smile, "Funny-face."

The last lad who'd called me that I'd put in the station hos-

pital. But the way she said it, I didn't mind a bit. I *have* a funny face. And she still didn't look like a killer.

Then the warden suggested we'd better go.

I asked her if there was anything I could do for her. She told me there wasn't.

"Just—just think of me once in a while," she said, smiling.

Then she began to bawl in the matron's arms, and the warden walked me out of there. He kept saying, "Don't let her get you. She's no good. The State proved it at her trial."

I told him what I had thought before, and he asked me didn't I know there was a war on. "All she wanted from your brother was a dependency allotment."

He started naming names, then, in connection with the State's case against her, and one stuck in my craw—that of Joe LaFanti. I had read it in the papers a long time ago, when he had been picked up by the cops and charged with one racket or another.

We shook hands in his office and I thanked him for being as helpful as he had. He said to think nothing of it, and I was out in front of the prison again, climbing into the taxi I had waiting. The square-jawed lad in the battered hat was still waiting, too.

I called to him and told him that if he intended to tail me back to Chicago, he might as well climb into the cab with me and split expenses as far as the station in Joliet.

He pretended that he didn't hear me, and that was all right with me. I was to wish a little later that I had walked over and busted him in the jaw. When I tried to do it at Central Bureau, he had too many cops around him.

I rode back in the sleeper all the way, and it was a hell of a thing. I kept seeing the girl Mona all the way, and thinking how little and white and frightened she had looked when I had left her bawling in the matron's arms.

I was still thinking about her when I walked through the

train gates into the LaSalle Street Station in Chicago and the big lad tapped me on the shoulder.

"Sergeant Duval?"

I said that was my name. He said that his name was Diamond, of headquarters Homicide Squad, and he wondered if I would mind answering a few questions he wanted to ask.

"Concerning what?" I asked.

He told me, "Murder."

He took me to headquarters, and there were eight big lads in the squad room, including the gent in the battered felt hat.

He thought he was a choirmaster. "Now, you're going to sing, and sing loud," he told me. He ran his finger across my campaign ribbons and medal bars. "Those don't mean a thing to us. You can buy 'em in any hock shop. Start talking, phony. What was the big gag about getting to see Mona Ambler?"

I told him the truth, and he laughed. "Don't give us that heifer dust. You just used that yarn about the kid as a stall to get in and talk to her. Where did she plant the rocks? What's LaFanti's latest stunt to save her?"

I said I didn't know; that I didn't know LaFanti.

They all laughed heartily at that. I insisted it was the truth, and the lad in the battered felt clipped me with a sap so hard that the whiskey veins stood out in his face and I bounced off the wall. "Start singing, stooge," he ordered.

I tried to get back at him but there were too many cops between us. Every time I'd belt one off his feet, two more would step up. They had me on the floor and were working on my face when a slim, blond, middle-aged man wearing nose glasses walked into the squad room and asked what was going on. I found out later his name was Olson and he was the First Assistant State's Attorney.

The guys who had been working on my face got up. Nobody answered him.

"I'm waiting, Captain Corson," Olson said.

The big lad in the battered felt was Corson. "Look. You run your office. I'll run mine," he told Olson. "LaFanti's up to some-

thing. I spotted it this morning when this musical-comedy soldier showed up at Mona's old apartment. He laid it on too thick, see? As if anyone didn't know where she was. The case has been in all the papers for two months."

Olson asked me how about it. I told him that outside of the *Stars and Stripes*, newspapers had been scarce on the beach-head at Anzio. He asked for my travel orders, read them, and handed them back, saying, "I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am that this happened, Duval. And as for you," he looked at Corson, "I wouldn't be surprised if this means your shield. It just so happens that the sergeant's stripes and ribbons aren't phony."

Corson's faced turned gray. He was forty-eight or forty-nine. I knew he was thinking of his pension. "How was I to know?" he asked, stiff-lipped. "I never saw a guy with three banks of ribbons before, outside of General MacArthur."

"You have now," Olson told him.

He said that I could use his office if I wanted to wash up and brush my uniform. I wanted to, and I did. When I looked half-way G.I. again, I lighted a cigarette and asked Olson if he would mind telling me the story. He asked if I meant about Mona. I told him I did.

He said, "There isn't a lot to tell. We've had her listed as LaFanti's girl for almost six months now. But outside of paying for a lawyer, he hasn't lifted a finger, so far as we can tell, to save her. That's what stirred Corson's rile. You see, LaFanti has always boasted that his political in is so strong that nobody connected with him would ever burn."

I asked him how long Mona had to live. He told me five days. He also said that they were expecting a last-minute move by LaFanti to save her, although the governor had sworn that he would refuse to reprieve her or commute her sentence.

I asked why the State was so anxious to burn her. He told me. It wasn't pretty. She and a diamond salesman by the name of Stein had gotten drunk together. At least, Stein had gotten drunk. Some time during the night, after he had passed out,

she had put a .38 to his head and blown his brains out. No one had heard the shot, but the coroner set the approximate time at four o'clock in the morning. She had made two outside phone calls after that but the police had been unable to trace them, as there was a new girl on the switchboard and she had neglected to write them down. At seven, Mona had called the desk and told them to send for the police. When Homicide had gotten there, she had been crying in a chair and some two hundred thousand dollars' worth of diamonds that were known to have been in Stein's possession had disappeared. Her prints were on the murder gun. The diamonds had never been found. She had confessed she killed Stein.

"Your brother picked a hell of a dame to fall in love with, he concluded. "If you'd come to me first, I could have told you that, as a sideline, she made a racket of marrying soldiers and then dunning them for a dependent's allowance. The Feds were after her when we got her."

I thanked him for his time and trouble. He wanted to know if there was anything more he could tell me. I told him he'd said enough, and got the hell out of there. My face was hot. No wonder Corson had thought I was a phony.

"Think of me once in a while."

I swore.

I started north up State Street. Somebody said, behind me, "Going our way, Sergeant?"

I started to turn, and a gun barrel swathed in a coat pocket bored into my spine.

"Which way are you going?" I asked.

The invisible lad with the gun prodded me toward a big car parked at the curb. There were two hoods in front. A big, smooth-shaven, good-looking lad with a smile as oily as his hair was holding down the back seat.

"Does it matter, Sergeant?" He smiled. "Get in. I want to talk to you. My name is LaFanti."

I hesitated and he turned off the smile like a light.

"Get in," he said coldly. "Get in, or we'll plug you right here in the street."

I got into the car.

LaFanti's apartment was something. It wasn't far from the Loop, on the lakefront. It occupied the whole top floor of the building. The high-beamed studio living room had a big stone fireplace at one end and a balcony at the other. French windows opened out onto a landscaped terrace. The Drive was twenty-eight floors below.

"You like it?" he asked me.

"It's quite a foxhole," I admitted.

One of the hoods, a blond Polack lad by the name of Hymie, chuckled. "He's okay, huh, Joe?"

LaFanti told him to shut up. A gun punk whom he called Gordan opened a portable bar and began to slop whiskey into highball glasses. LaFanti asked if I wanted a drink, and I admitted that I could use one. There had been plenty of wine where I'd come from, but Old Grandad had been rare.

Hymie asked how I liked the Army, and I told him fine. One of the other lads said that he'd tried to get into the Marines, but they had turned him down on account of his record.

When I had finished my drink, LaFanti suggested, "Now, suppose you tell me all about it."

I asked if he meant about Mona. He said he did, so I told him what I had told the warden and Olson. I said I didn't see why the kid should suffer for something that was not his fault. I also told him what both Captain Corson and Olson had said about him.

He said, "Pay no attention to those guys. They'd give an arm apiece to hang a bad rap on me, soldier. They're jealous, see?"

I didn't, but I said I did.

Gordan poured another drink. LaFanti said, "Now that we've got that out of the way, let's quit stalling, Sergeant, and get down to cases. The dame shot off her mouth, of course?"

I told him, "She didn't say a dozen words, outside of giving me her lawyer's name and address, so I could fix it about making an allotment and leaving my insurance to the kid."

He asked if I expected him to believe something as crude as that.

I told him it was the truth.

"Why lie to me, Sergeant?" he asked. "I know dames—and I've been lied to by experts." He took a wallet from his pocket and began to count out bills on the arm of his chair. "But because you didn't crack to either Olson or Corson, I'm willing to do right by you. Say when."

I told him he was talking over my head.

"What did I tell you?" Gordan asked. "All small-town punks are would-be sharpers. He's going to stick you for plenty. Then I wouldn't trust him twenty feet."

Hymie suggested that maybe I was leveling. They all laughed at that, LaFanti laughing from the corner of his mouth. "Okay. How much?" he demanded.

I wanted to know how much for what.

The lad who had wanted to join the Marines said, "The guy is smart. He's making the mountain come to Mohammed."

LaFanti drummed on the arm of his chair a minute. "What did you do before you got into the Army, Sergeant?"

I told him I had worked in a garage, and he wanted to know how I'd like to buy it. I said that would be fine but that I doubted if I ever could, it being a pretty fair-sized garage and having the Ford agency, besides.

"You can buy it if you'll keep your mouth shut," he told me. "I'll lay the money on the line with any lawyer you name. Or I'll put it up in escrow with your hometown bank. All you have to do is keep your mouth shut for five more days about what that screwy dame in the death house told you."

I couldn't think of anything she'd told me that I hadn't already told him, outside of her saying that she hadn't known that men like me still existed. And she had been wrong on that

score. A lot of men are homely, and a lot of us have red hair. All of us Duvals have.

I told him I didn't know what he was talking about, and he got ugly. "Okay. If you want it that way," he said, "I guess it can be arranged." He nodded to the would-be Marine. "Soften him up a bit, Tommy."

The hood walked over to where I was sitting and threw a hard right at my head. I rolled with the punch, brought my knees to my chest, and gave him both feet in the belly so hard that he went through the fireplace screen into the big stone fireplace.

"You hadn't ought to have told him to punch me," I told LaFanti. "I don't want anything from you guys. All that I want is out of here."

Gordan slipped a sap from his hip pocket and looked at me thoughtfully.

"You'd better just keep on looking," I warned him.

LaFanti got to his feet. His face was ugly.

"Think it over, Joe," Hymie warned him. "Don't get us in no deeper. This guy ain't a punk. If he doesn't show on schedule, the whole damn United States Army is going to be looking for him."

LaFanti said, "Yeah," sourly. "That's the reason I tried to buy him off. But we can arrange the other if we have to. There are always accidents. Maybe he could go swimming and drown." He walked across the room away from me. When he turned back he was holding a long-barreled .38. I could tell by the way he held it that he knew how to use it.

"Okay. Let's have it, Duval," he said. "Start talking. What lies did she tell about me? And where did she stash the ice?"

Tommy crawled out of the fireplace. Right then he would have made a hell-of-a-looking Marine. "Let me shoot the son," he begged.

LaFanti waved him to one side. "I said start talking, Sergeant. I'm through handling you with gloves."

I told him he was nuts. The girl hadn't told me a thing.

"I get it now," he said. "No wonder you didn't tell Corson. You're figuring on keeping the ice for yourself and holding the other thing over my head as a club."

Both he and the lad with the sap took a couple of steps toward me. Tommy and Hymie drew their guns. I wished I knew what he wanted to know. But I didn't. So I backed a few steps and knocked over a little end table.

A picture in a silver frame fell face-up on the floor. It looked like Mona—and it didn't. In the picture she could have been a pin-up girl by Varga. She was all lines and glitter and flame. No wonder Johnny had been crazy about her. But the death house had done things. She wasn't glittering now. She was a meek, scared kid. Somehow, I liked her better.

When I had backed as far as I could, I told LaFanti, "I don't know what I'm supposed to know, or what Mona is supposed to have told me. But if you're figuring on taking me, come on!"

LaFanti said, "Don't mark him up if you can help it."

Tommy and Hymie came first. I cow-kicked one and broke the other's arm. They went down and out of the picture, but not for long. Gordan was tougher. He danced in, swiped me with his gun barrel, and danced back before I could land a blow.

I picked up the end table and threw it in his face. Before he could get it out of his eyes, I slugged him with the side of my hand just above the kidneys. He went down screaming that he was maimed for life.

LaFanti backed up a few feet.

"You're good," he admitted.

So was he. I tried every trick I'd learned in dirty fighting. He blocked them with barroom counters. Guys who live in fourteen-room apartments and drive V-16 Cadillacs usually know their trades, and he knew his.

He backed me into the wall and I tried to knee him. He caught my knee and we went to the floor. Gordan was back on his feet. So were Tommy and Hymie. First I rode him, then he

rode me, his three hoods hovering like buzzards and slapping at my head with their guns whenever I showed on top.

I couldn't take much of that. I didn't. There was a *whoosh!* as one of them landed a gun barrel on the back of my skull, and the whole damn apartment blew up.

For a moment I thought I was back at Anzio. I buried my nose in the carpet. Then the flares began to die out and someone asked, "You don't suppose the guy was leveling? You don't suppose that the dame didn't talk?"

"Hell, no," LaFanti grunted. "Unless we get rid of the guy, we won't be safe until after they pull the switch."

I opened my eyes and Gordan said, "Look out! He's coming to!"

LaFanti walked over beside me. "Go back to sleep, punk," he said.

To make certain that I did, he kicked me in the jaw.

It was night when I came to again. Even that high up, I could hear the lake swishing against the rock breakwater. I was lying on a bed. I wasn't tied. I figured that they were afraid that a rope might mark my wrists, and the Feds would be suspicious, wherever I was found.

I lay looking at the ceiling through the dark and wondering how many of them were still in the apartment and what my best move would be.

It was then I heard the girl crying. It wasn't loud, and she wasn't really crying. Her breath sucked in jerkily and died in sobs, as if she had been crying a long time. I tried to place the sound and couldn't. She could be in one of the rooms, or even in an apartment on one of the lower floors.

I got off the bed and walked to the door. I expected it to be locked. It wasn't. I cracked it and looked out. Gordan and Tommy were sprawled in easy chairs, reading the evening papers. No one else seemed to be in the room.

I went back to the bed and sat down. The girl was crying

harder now. I wondered who she was. I wondered what LaFanti and his crowd thought Mona had told me.

"Unless we get rid of this guy, we won't be safe until after they pull the switch."

I remembered LaFanti saying that, and it didn't make sense to me. Johnny had been the quick one in our family. I always get things the hard way. All I could think of was getting out of the joint and maybe going and talking to Olson. He probably could put it together.

Outside of a few sore spots and bruises, I felt pretty good. I walked back to the door. The two hoods were still reading their papers.

As I watched them, Tommy suddenly said, "There'll be hell to pay when he doesn't show."

Gordan got up from his chair like his kidneys were still hurting, and uncorked a fresh bottle of rye. "So what? No one saw him get into the car. He can't be traced to us."

Both of them took a drink and began to talk. I slipped out into the room and tiptoed across the carpet. It was like walking through grass. The pile came halfway up my shoes. I wanted Tommy's gun. It was lying on an end table beside him.

They heard me before I could get it. Tommy swore, and his hand streaked for the gun. I got it before he did, and I was through fooling around. I poked the barrel of it into his mouth and he spat out teeth like beans. Then he tried to gag—and couldn't. I'd pulled the trigger.

Whimpering, Gordan threw a slug at me. The lead went wide by inches. I could see by his eyes he was thinking of the hole in Tommy's head. Before he could trigger again, I scooped up the rye bottle and smashed it across his face. He went down howling and clawing the glass from his eyes.

I gave him the boot to make sure that he'd stay where he was. Then I got out of there.

The elevator cage was waiting at the floor. The pimply-faced kid who ran it was peering through the grille.

He wanted to know if those were shots that he'd heard. I

told him they were and not to let anyone in until I came back with the cops.

He looked at me as if I was crazy. "But that's Joe LaFanti's apartment," he protested.

I asked him if he was telling me.

I thought I would be back with the law in minutes. It was closer to an hour. Captain Corson paced Olson's office, damning all red tape.

Olson refused to be hurried. He insisted, "We want LaFanti, yes. But we want him right this time. And getting him right means warrants."

He had four of them when we started: Search, kidnaping, felonious assault, and assault with deadly weapon with intent to kill.

Once we were started, we went fast. I rode with Olson and Corson in a squad car. There were four more cars behind us, one of them filled with reporters. I asked Olson what he thought LaFanti had been afraid Mona would tell me.

He said it was hard to say. Corson said he was willing to bet that LaFanti had killed Stein himself and that Mona was covering for him.

"But that doesn't make sense," Olson said. "In the first place, LaFanti had an alibi. In the second place, nobody like Mona would go to the chair for any man."

I expected to see a crowd outside the building. There wasn't. The same pimply-faced kid was running the elevator. He looked right through me like he didn't see me.

Corson asked him if anybody had gone up since I left, and he said, "Naw. Nobody's gone up since the blonde about three this afternoon."

Olson looked at him sharply but said nothing. We squeezed into the cage like K-rations. One of the reporters wanted to know what Olson was charging LaFanti with, and he gave them the list.

They wanted to know if he thought he could make it stick. He said he was going to try.

The door was closed. Corson banged on it with his gun. LaFanti was home. He opened the door the length of the safety chain and growled, "So what do you want, copper?"

He'd changed to a dressing gown and slippers since I'd seen him last. "Remember me?" I asked.

"Open up," Olson said. "This is a pinch, LaFanti. We're coming in."

The big hood shook his head. "Oh, no. I know my rights. No one comes in here without a warrant."

"We have one," Olson said. He read it to him through the crack.

LaFanti hesitated, closed the door, and slipped the safety chain. When he opened the door again, he said, "Let's talk right here."

"The hell you say!" Corson growled.

He pushed by him into the living room. LaFanti wanted to know what he was charged with. One of the reporters told him kidnaping and attempted murder.

"Now I know it's a gag," he said, grinning.

I repeated, "Remember me?"

He looked at me and shook his head. "No. I can't say that I do. What's the gripe with you, soldier?"

I said, "I'll gripe you!" and swung a hard right to his jaw.

He let it slide off a forearm and asked Olson, "What's eating on this guy? What's the matter? Is he crazy?"

I said, "You never saw me before, I suppose? You and three of your lads didn't snatch me. You didn't bring me up here and offer to buy me a garage if I'd keep my mouth shut about what Mona told me this morning. And when I refused, you and your three hoods didn't beat me unconscious. You weren't planning to dump me in the lake. You—"

I realized that everyone was staring at me, and I ran down like an unwound clock. Lumping it all together, it *did* sound screwy as hell. There wasn't a sign of anything wrong in the apartment.

I looked over at Olson. He asked, "Where are the lads you say you killed?"

LaFanti puzzled, "Killed?"

I pushed past him into the room. There were no bodies on the floor. There was no blood. There was no sign of a fight. Even the end table that I had thrown in Gordan's face was standing, unbroken, by a chair, supporting a half-filled bottle of rye.

"They were there," I insisted. "Right there on the floor. I left them bleeding like pigs."

Corson knelt down and felt the rug, then smelled it.

"So?" Olson asked.

"Not on this rug," Corson told him. His men fanned out to search the apartment.

LaFanti crossed to a door. "If you don't mind, just pass this one room by."

"That's the room," I told Olson, "that I came to in. I lay in there for half an hour listening to some dame crying."

LaFanti grinned. "The guy is nuts. I—"

I pushed him aside and opened the door. A young blonde was sitting on the bed putting on her shoes. If she had been crying she didn't show it.

She looked at the mob in the living room and gasped, "Joel! What is this, LaSalle Street Station?"

I shut the door and LaFanti grinned. "You still think that's the same room, soldier? Or have you got your apartments mixed?"

Corson asked, "How long has she been here?"

The blonde heard him and called through the door, "Tell him it's none of his damn business, Joe."

One of the reporters repeated what the elevator boy had said. "'Naw. Nobody's gone up since the blonde about three this afternoon.'"

LaFanti walked over to Olson and began to talk earnestly, in a low voice. I caught the words, "battle fatigue—war neuroses." They sounded funny as hell coming from a punk like Joe La-

Fanti—but Olson didn't seem to think so. He was listening thoughtfully, nodding his head and not looking at me.

Corson continued to prowls the apartment. I saw him pick up something small and white, gaze at it thoughtfully a moment, then drop it into one of his vest pockets.

I began to edge toward the door, and stopped, staring at the picture of Mona in the silver frame, remembering something that Johnny had told me. I had the whole picture now, even if some of the pieces were missing.

On the other side of the room, Olson was asking, dryly, "And you're willing to swear that he wasn't up here at all this afternoon?"

"I swear," LaFanti lied. "Ask the elevator boy. Ask anyone in the building. Until he walked in with you fellows, I never saw him before."

"And Tommy and Gordan?"

"They're down at our place in the Dunes." He nodded across the room. "After all, when a man has company——"

Corson figured my move just as I reached the hall door, and called, "Hold it, Mikel!"

I whipped out the gun that I had taken from Tommy and leveled it. "In a garrison cap," I told him. "All I want to know from you is this. If a lad is committed to the psycho ward in this man's town, how long does it take to put him through the mill?"

He told me four or five days.

I said, "Thanks. That's all that I needed to know."

I slipped out the door and closed it behind me.

LaFanti tugged the door open, shouting, "Stop him. The man is crazy!"

I put a slug through the lobe of his left ear. He shut the door.

The elevator punk gaped at me, open-mouthed. "So help me, Sergeant—" he began.

I told him to shut up and take me down. I had a hell of a lot to do and not much time in which to do it. More, I had felt a damn sight safer in Anzio than I did in Chicago.

They *had* to kill me now, I knew. And while they didn't know what had tipped me, they *knew* that I knew.

There was no one in the lobby of the hotel where Mona had formerly had an apartment but a little old rheumy-eyed clerk. I took a twenty from my money belt and laid it on the counter. "That's yours for the right answers to three questions," I told him.

He wanted to know what they were.

I asked, "Who was Mona's best girl friend? What beauty shop did she go to? Where did she use to live before she came to Chicago?"

He said, "A mousy little dame by the name of Clara. The shop across the street. Pierre, South Dakota."

I told him the bill was his.

The beauty shop across the street was closed, but there was a light in the back room. A well-built, middle-aged, red-haired woman answered my pounding on the door.

"I'm afraid someone's steered you wrong, soldier," she said, smiling. "This isn't that kind of a shop."

I told her that all I wanted was some information. She considered my question and shook her head.

"No. Come to think of it, she didn't."

I asked if she knew her right name. She told me she thought it was Jones. "I know her right first name was Mary. Why? What's all this to you, soldier?"

"It could be a lot," I told her.

I thanked her and got on my horse. The radios should be squawking now. They were. There was a prowler car parked on the next corner. One lad yawned behind the wheel while his partner sneaked a beer. The car radio was blating:

"Five-feet-eleven. . . . One hundred and eighty pounds. . . . Red hair. . . . Broken nose. . . . Blue eyes. . . . When last seen he was in uniform. . . . Tech sergeant's rating. . . . He is wearing a triple bank of campaign ribbons and medal bars. . . . He is armed. . . . Handle this man carefully. . . ."

I waited in a store window until the other cop came out of the tavern and the prowler car pulled away. They might want to handle me carefully, but nobody wanted to be as careful as I.

The tavern on the corner was as good as any. I took my bars from tunic and ripped the chevrons from sleeve. The thread ends gave me some trouble. When I was satisfied, I walked into the bar and bought a beer. I also asked the barman would he mind if I used his phone booth to make a long-distance call.

He said that was what it was there for and gave me change in quarters for my five, grinning. "You ought to fall for some dame that lives closer, soldier," he told me.

I said I was working on it, and went into the phone booth and asked long distance to connect me with the Pierre operator. She wanted to know who I wanted to talk to in Pierre and I told her I didn't know. She said there would be a charge and I said that would be all right.

Then I waited.

When I got through to the girl in Pierre, I asked her to connect me with anyone in town who might know a Mary Jones who had left there about eight years ago. She said she would connect me with the editor of the local newspaper, who knew everyone in town. He didn't know the Jones family very well, but he did know what I wanted to find out. I thanked him and hung up.

I bought another beer and caught the barman looking at my chest, then at my sleeve. I looked in the back-bar mirror. I wasn't fooling anyone. My ribbons and chevrons were in my pocket, but you could see their outline on my tunic where the Italian sun hadn't faded the goods.

He walked into the back room. I scrambled and whistled down a cruising cab. At first I just told him to roll. Then I gave him the address of the South Side nursing home where Johnny's kid had been placed, according to Mona. I doubted that they would think of looking for me there.

The driver was full of misinformation. He told me all about

myself. I was a shell-shocked loony. Every cop and M.P. and Shore Patrol in town was looking for me. I had tried to kill Joe LaFanti because he had been nice to my brother's girl—as if one more guy in her life had mattered.

I pulled the old one about Chicago not being as big as New York or London, but I didn't laugh. All I could think of was that scared little kid in the death house telling me about Johnny. . . .

On a hunch, I had the cab wait half a block from the nursing home and told him I wouldn't be long.

The lady who answered my ring was nice but firm about it. She said it was after ten o'clock, and that if I wanted to see one of the children I would have to come back in the morning.

I gambled she didn't listen to police calls and told her who I was. That made everything different.

"Of course, Sergeant Duval," she said. "Come in."

The kid was in a crib on the second floor. And he was Johnny's. He had the same red hair and blue eyes. More, he wasn't asleep. When he saw me he smiled and kind of burped.

I told the nurse, "Look. He's laughing."

She patted him until he did it again, and said it was only colic—but it looked like a laugh to me and I felt pretty good about it. He was Johnny's kid, sure. But legally he was going to be mine. Or was he? It was time for me to get on my horse again.

I told the lady that as soon as I got back to the outfit I'd make arrangements through the C.O. with the O.D.B. to send her an allotment for his keep, but meanwhile, did they need any money?

She said no, that his board had been paid for six months in advance by the friend of his mother's who had brought him, along with a satchel of three-cornered pants, on the morning Stein had been killed.

I asked her what time this was, and she told me about five in the morning.

That rang a bell. I asked could I see the satchel and she

didn't see why not, but they hadn't been able so far to use any of the things. It seemed each baby had a locker. She opened Johnny's and handed me one of those rubberized canvas duffel bags like you can buy in most any drugstore. It was still packed with little shirts and dresses and diapers.

"The shirts and dresses we can use," she told me, "when he grows into them. But we have a diaper service."

She went to quiet a kid that had awakened. I felt the bottom of the bag. It was too thick by half an inch, and the rubberized lining on the bottom had been pulled loose at the corners and glued back. I had the last two pieces of the picture. I knew why the girl in LaFanti's apartment had been crying! I also knew where the Stein diamonds were!

The crying kid had awakened the others. They all were bawling now, including Johnny. I put the bag back in his locker. It was a lot safer there than with me.

Out on the street again, I could hear a police siren yelling. I walked back to my cab and asked the hacker if he'd ever had a fare to Joe LaFanti's place down in the Dunes.

He said he had, that it was just the other side of Miller and that he had hauled a state senator down there once.

I said, "Okay. Let's go."

He wanted to know if I meant to the Dunes, and when I said I did he looked at me hard and I knew that he recognized me.

The siren cut out abruptly. The green lights of a squad car rounded the corner and coasted past us to brake in front of the nursing home.

"Make a U-turn," I told the hacker.

He gaped from me to the squad car, goggle-eyed. Two of the lads had gone up to the door. Two more were standing in the street looking back at the cab.

"Geez! I can't do it, Duval," he whimpered. "They'll shoot. Those guys are looking for you."

I showed him Tommy's gun and he changed his mind.

Down the street, the two lads who had gone to the door were running back to the squad car, yelling at the driver to turn

around. The prowl car swung in a sharp turn, pulled up over the curb, and pinned the cab with its spotlight.

Then lead began to hammer the cab. I shot out the spot and put a slug through their right front tire.

"Now roll!" I ordered my driver.

He pushed the gas to the floorboards, saying, "You'll be sorry."

"I can't help it," I yelled at him. "My war neuroses are driving me nuts!"

The lodge was low and rambling, built in a hollow between two dunes, about a hundred yards from the road. Sand had drifted over the lane leading in. There were lights in the big front room and one in the back of the house.

I paid off the hacker at the road. He took the money but said he'd wait. He said, when he thought it over, I didn't act too crazy to him. I probably had a right to be sore at LaFanti, on Johnny's account. Besides, his cab was full of bullet holes and he'd probably get hell when he checked in, if he didn't get arrested.

I walked across the sand to the house. There was a moon, but clouds hid it most of the time. When I got close to the house, I crawled.

There was a big screened porch across the front of the living room. The screen door was unhooked. I eased inside and looked in through the windows.

Several hard-faced gents I didn't know were playing cards. Gordan sat in a chair, his face wrapped up like a mummy's, not saying anything. Hymie, his arm in a sling, was pacing up and down like a yardbird on his first tour of guard duty. He kept saying, "Why doesn't Joe come? What the hell are we going to do if the law busts in and wants to talk to Tommy?"

One of the lads playing cards said not to worry about the law, but that he, for one, would feel better when they got rid of the stiffs.

Another lad wanted to know what they were waiting for. Hymie told him, "Joe."

Gordan groaned, "Damn Joe LaFanti. And damn Stein and his diamonds."

I crawled around to the back of the house. A big colored boy in a white chef's cap was snoring in the kitchen. I walked in past him to the hall.

The joint had cost LaFanti money. The kitchen was as big as a house, and there were enough rooms for a hotel. I looked in five bedrooms before I found them. The room was dark except for moonlight.

Tommy was lying on an Indian rug, wrapped in a sheet. A couple of sashweights were wired to his ankles. I unwrapped him enough to get at his pockets. When I found the spare clip for his gun I felt better.

The girl lay watching me from the bed. Her wrists and her ankles were tied. Her eyes were swollen from crying. She tried to talk and couldn't. Her lips were plastered with tape. I felt the lobe of the ear nearest me, then I sat down on the bed beside her and asked her had she killed Stein.

She shook her head.

I asked her could she prove it on anyone else.

She shook her head again and began to cry. That brought the situation back to snafu. I cut the ropes on her wrists and ankles. She eased the tape from her lips. The first thing she said was, "They're going to kill me!"

I nodded. "Yeah. I figured that." Then I lighted a cigarette while I figured my best move. It was a mistake. She saw my face in the flare of the match and screamed:

"Johnny!"

The chef in the kitchen woke up and wanted to know, "What the hell—?"

I tried to shut the girl up and couldn't. She was hysterical. "They told me you were dead," she screamed. "They told me you were dead!"

Feet pounded down the hall. I kicked the glass and sash out

of the window, picked the girl off the bed, and dived for the outside just as the room door opened. A slug whistled past my ear. Another one burned my side. The girl kept right on screaming.

When I rounded the corner of the house, the colored boy was starting out the kitchen door. He saw me and changed his mind. He stepped back in and slammed the door. Hymie yanked it open and flipped a third shot at me. I stopped and threw one back. He sagged against the jamb, then slid down it to the floor. I was sorry it had to happen.

No one else tried to stop us. Either they weren't in it as deep as the others, or they figured like Gordan did, and wanted to damn Joe LaFanti and Stein and his diamonds.

The hacker was waiting a few feet from his cab. He had the engine running and a tire tool in one hand. "You okay?" he asked me.

I said I was, and put the girl into the cab. He wanted to know who she was, and I said that he should ask her. He did. But she couldn't tell him a thing. She'd fainted.

The morning was hot and steamy. The prison was still asleep as we pulled up in front of the warden's office. But Kane and Olson were waiting. So were Captain Corson and LaFanti.

I hoped I hadn't made a mistake in phoning them to meet us. The girl's story sounded screwy as hell to me. I didn't see how we could prove it.

Olson smiled at me thinly. "You seem to have made quite a night of it, Sergeant."

I told him I'd spent nights I'd enjoyed more.

The girl didn't look at LaFanti. He didn't look at her. She just sat in a chair and began to cry. Her cheekbones were flushed. Her cheeks had sunken in. The tape and the crying she had done had played hell with her make-up. She wasn't pretty any more.

Olson polished his eyeglasses. "So?"

I looked at Warden Kane. "She'll be here in a moment," he told me.

Corson turned his back like he had to cough. He didn't. He was shifting his shoulder holster so he could get at his gun in a hurry.

I took Tommy's gun from my belt and laid it on the warden's desk. Then the matron came in with Mona.

She wasn't a scared kid any more. She was a woman. Her hair wasn't hanging in braids; it was done up on top of her head. She had what it took to fill out a gray prison gown and make it a Paris creation. Her eyes were shining and she was holding her chin high. But when she saw the girl in the chair it began to quiver.

Then they were crying in each other's arms.

Olson wanted to know what the hell. I told him, "You convicted the wrong girl. It seems there are two Jones girls, just like there were two Duval boys."

Warden Kane said that he didn't get it. I told him it was a long story and maybe LaFanti would explain. He told me to go to hell, so I asked Mona what was her name.

She told me Clara Jones.

"I'm Mona," the other girl said. "But I didn't kill Stein."

"Can you prove this?" Olson asked.

She said she couldn't. Her story wasn't pretty. She had gotten Stein drunk. She had clipped him in an alley. And during the night Tommy and Gordan had brought him into her room and LaFanti was shaking her and telling her that she would burn unless she gave him the diamonds. They had searched the room but hadn't found them. Then LaFanti and his boys had left. Frightened sober, she had phoned her sister, Clara, who had only arrived in town some days before.

Olson studied the two girls. Both were about five feet two. Both had long black hair. Both were built like Varga girls. Both had blue eyes and fair skin. But the resemblance stopped right there. Mona looked like herself. Clara looked like Mona might have looked at one time.

Olson wanted to know if the relationship had been established. I told him not legally, but that if he would check with Pierre, South Dakota, he could establish it without too much difficulty.

Corson admitted, unwillingly, that maybe the original pinch had been a bull on his part. His thick neck got red. "But the dame *said* she was Mona. And she stood mute, which is the same-like as pleading guilty."

Olson recalled that there being no previous arrest or conviction, there had been no fingerprints to compare.

Clara took up the story. That was the part I'd been afraid of—it was bound to sound thin. People didn't stick out their necks that way. Or, did they? Would I have done the same thing for Johnny?

Clara had come to the hotel. She had believed Mona's story. Between them they had figured out what had seemed at the time a logical means of procedure. Mona knew all the ropes. She had the diamonds to trade for the truth. If Clara would take her place for a few hours, she thought that she could make a deal with LaFanti. What neither girl realized at the time was the fact that this was something that not even LaFanti's political drag could get him out of. This was murder. It was either his neck or Mona's.

And then I thought of the kid, and I could sort of see Clara doing it.

Mona had left the apartment with the diamonds. She had picked up the kid at the apartment and had delivered him to the South Side nursing home, posing as a friend of herself.

Corson wanted to know why.

"Because I was afraid Joe would snatch him," she told him. "But he didn't. He snatched me instead. He's kept me locked up in his apartment ever since. He *wanted* Clara to burn."

"Why?" Kane asked.

I told him the answer to that. "Because LaFanti knew that once somebody had burned, the law wouldn't dare to admit that it had made a mistake by reopening the case. Meanwhile,

he could work on Mona and maybe make her tell him where she had stashed the diamonds."

LaFanti sneered, "And I suppose you know where they are?"

I told him, "Sure. They're under Johnny's pants in the bag Mona took to the nursing home."

Corson said that he would be damned. LaFanti wanted to know if I expected a sane judge and jury to believe a yarn like that.

There was a long silence. Then Olson sighed, "As much as I dislike to, I'm afraid that I must say that the story is pretty fantastic. Naturally, such a gross miscarriage of justice could not take place without collusion, fraudulent cooperation, of the State Attorney's office."

This was it. I looked at Olson and said, "Naturally. Why don't you take down your hair, Olson, and admit that you are not only LaFanti's political drag, but also his silent partner?"

It turned so still I could hear my heart beat.

I picked up Tommy's gun, watching Corson. "You don't get me in a cell," I told them. "And it won't wash off this time. You've got your hands too dirty. The thing LaFanti was afraid of was that Clara might have told me the truth when I saw her yesterday—"

Olson shook his head. "The man is a mental case. That story of his being in LaFanti's apartment yesterday afternoon was another pipe dream."

Corson's neck turned red. All the time I had been sniping with a carbine, he'd sat back with a .45 in his hand. "No. It wasn't a pipe dream," he said. The red spread into his face. "Look. Just who the hell do you guys think you are that you can pull the wool over a cop's eyes who was investigating homicides when you were wearing rubber pants?" He stabbed a finger at LaFanti. "Duval wasn't in your apartment yesterday afternoon? He didn't kill Tommy and damn near kill Phil Gordan?"

"He did not," LaFanti said thickly.

Corson took a white object from his vest pocket. "Then

where did this tooth come from that he blew out of Tommy's mouth? And why did the Acme cleaners replace your rug between six and seven last night while Olson was stalling like hell to give you time to clean up and get Mona and the stiff out, by insisting we needed warrants? And how could a punk elevator boy, making twenty dollars a week, suddenly buy a convertible Caddy coupe for two grand, second-hand? It couldn't be because he was lying, like that blonde, could it, Joe?"

LaFanti turned as white as Olson. "You can't prove a thing."

"I think I can," Corson said. "As soon as Duval called me, I phoned the Indiana state cops and had them check on your place in the Dunes. Everyone was gone but Hymie and Tommy and Gordan. Hymie and Tommy weren't talking. Duval had seen to that. But Gordan sang like a canary."

He told the story that Gordan had told. LaFanti, Hymie, Tommy, and Gordan had been keeping an eye on Stein. They'd seen Mona clip him, but when they'd looked for the diamonds at her place, they hadn't found them. They thought Mona hadn't got them and tried to strong-arm the information out of Stein. Stein fought and LaFanti shot him. They planted him in Mona's room, partly to clear themselves, partly to force her to come across with the stones, if she had them.

LaFanti screamed, "I've got an alibi!"

"Yeah, sure," Corson said. "You were supposed to be talking to Olson."

LaFanti shot twice through his pocket. I missed him, but Corson didn't. The hood reached up a palm as if to say nix, then he followed his hand to the floor.

"How about you, Olson?" Corson asked.

Olson said he would prefer a judge and jury. To prove it he held up his hands.

Then I realized that Clara was crying. "She's hurt! He shot her!" she cried.

Corson walked over to Mona and knelt beside her. "He get you bad, kid?" he asked gruffly.

She didn't answer him. She couldn't.

I wondered a little what she would say to Johnny. She was smiling a little, so maybe they were talking over the old times, when he'd been home. Whatever she'd become since, she'd been O.K. then. And Johnny had lived in a few glass houses himself, so he wasn't much of a hand at throwing rocks.

Clara buried her face in my tunic.

Corson cleared his throat, hard. "Just tell me this, Duval? How did you know there were *two* girls?"

"Johnny told me," I said. "An Italian jeweler in Palermo wanted to sell him some antique earrings for his girl, but he said that she couldn't wear 'em because her ears weren't pierced." I tugged Clara's old-fashioned ear-drops. "And Clara's are."

Then Corson bellowed at Kane and asked what was he staring at and why wasn't he phoning the governor on account of I only had three days of my leave left and I had things to attend to. So after a while they said that we could go about our business, Clara and I.

Just a Minute, Dr. Marlowe

Stories involving the technical aspects of psychiatry are rare, but there is a definite place for them and a waiting audience at all times. Because of this it is sad that Mrs. Ray has not followed her original plan of creating a series of Dr. Marlowe stories for Cosmopolitan. She was well on her way toward completing a second story when—presto! as the magician says—something happened to change her mind. Something was wrong with the story somewhere. And because of that “something,” Dr. Marlowe died after only one appearance—died as surely as Drury Lane or Professor Poggioli, though his demise is not to be found in any printed record.

DR. ALAN MARLOWE ran his palms over his hair and half rose from his chair on the witness stand. Thank God, *that* is over, his gesture seemed to say.

“Just a minute, Dr. Marlowe,” drawled the prosecuting attorney, and Marlowe dropped back into his seat.

“You stated,” began the attorney in his deliberately heckling tone, “that you originally had serious doubts as to the prisoner’s insanity.”

“Emotional imbalance,” corrected Dr. Marlowe.

“You will pardon me, Doctor, if I use words the jury and the witnesses can understand.”

Marlowe waved the objection wearily aside.

“You had doubts at first that the prisoner, Maurice Zecca, was insane. On what grounds?”

“When I first examined him it was obvious the man was malingering an—”

“No technical terms, please, Doctor. Malingering?”

"In words of two syllables, he was faking the symptoms of insanity."

"Thank you, Doctor. Suppose we stick to words of two syllables. What made you think he was faking?"

"It was obvious. No one, however clever or however well acquainted with the symptoms of schizophrenia, not even if he were coached by a psychiatrist, could fool an expert. Zecca was certainly lucid the first time I saw him and was deliberately assuming what he imagined were the symptoms of mental illness. The whole picture of schizophrenia which he attempted to reproduce was, to use a two-syllable word, phony. Moreover—"

"Just a minute, Doctor. You say that an expert could not be deceived. Yet the two psychiatrists who have already testified, who I presume you will admit are experts—"

"Certainly."

"—did not consider that the prisoner was faking. How do you account for that?"

Marlowe shrugged. "Evidently they saw the man in a different condition from what I did. The victims of these illnesses sometimes have periods of lucidity. Zecca's guards and several visitors to his cell have stated that he frequently appeared to be normal. It was evidently during such an interval that I first examined him."

"You had other reasons for believing he was faking?"

"Yes. His history does not indicate that any symptoms of *insanity* appeared prior to the commission of the crime. None of his acquaintances ever thought of him as unbalanced or even 'queer.' Besides, there is no history of insanity in his family."

"But the second time you saw him he was in a very different condition?"

"After my second visit there was no doubt in my mind that the man was, to put it in lay terms, a raving maniac. It would be impossible for anyone to fake the symptoms he displayed that afternoon."

"So by your own admission, then, you were wrong the first time. So an expert *can* be deceived?"

"I wouldn't say—"

The prosecuting attorney flung himself across his desk. "Isn't it possible, Dr. Marlowe, that you might have been wrong the second time—and right the first?"

As Marlowe was about to answer, he was interrupted by a howl from the prisoner. Struggling with his guards, to whom he was handcuffed, Zecca poured forth such a stream of profanity that on every face in the courtroom shock and disgust appeared. While his guards sought to quiet him, the judge dropped his forehead into his hands, closing out the scene. The curses were followed by laughter, high and empty, and finally the prisoner sank back on the bench, casting about him a dark, threatening look.

"That will be all, Dr. Marlowe," said the attorney, waving him from the stand.

At the moment of stepping down from the witness box, Alan Marlowe caught sight of a vaguely familiar face at the rear of the room. The man turned his head away as though desirous of avoiding Marlowe's scrutiny. *That's odd*, thought the doctor. *Now, who the devil is he?*

A recess was called. Marlowe rose. Even for him, accustomed as he was to dealing with those whose words and feet had betrayed them, the exhibition they had witnessed that day in court of a mind turned against society and itself had been trying. While there was no doubt in his mind that Zecca was now insane, he was not entirely convinced that he had been at the time of committing the crime.

How responsible was he the night he committed that brutal and revolting murder, afterward dragging the body of his victim, a young girl, to the doorstep of an apartment house and there leaving it, as though he actually desired to expose its bruised nakedness to the public gaze? That question troubled Marlowe deeply.

He watched Zecca being led from the room, still struggling

with his guards. He did not look the brutal type of murderer. In the intervals of apathy between his outbursts in court, his face had something almost feminine about it. But when goaded to fury by some incomprehensible inner motivation, he no longer looked weak or effeminate, but indescribably frightening.

"Well, you fixed it for him, Doc," commented one of the spectators, a big fellow, shabbily dressed, approaching Marlowe. "They can't give him the chair now."

Marlowe glanced at the man. He was the loafer type, scraping acquaintance for the sole purpose of getting one more thrill out of his day in court.

"The prosecutor hit the soft spot in my testimony, all right. You see, I am none too sure that Zecca was insane at the time of committing the crime. And that's the whole point, of course."

"He sure is nuts now, ain't he?" The flabby face broke into a grin. "I seen some funny drunks in my day, loonies too, but this bird beats 'em all. Gee, when he started howlin' I thought I'd bust."

"It *does* strike some people that way," admitted Marlowe, no trace of irony in his voice. "Of course, as a doctor, I—"

"Oh, naturally, you gotta take it serious, Doc. But you was smart to see he maybe wasn't bughouse the night of the murder. Maybe he was only hopped up. He took the stuff, you know."

"Ah, you knew him, then?"

"Morry and me went to school together. I ain't seen much of him since, but I heard he was taking the stuff. Us kids used to smoke marijuana, and I guess later on he went in for somethin' stronger."

"Really? That point should have been brought out in the testimony. Why didn't you come forward as a witness?"

"Well, I couldn't swear to it myself. Ain't seen him only once or twice since we quit school. I don't get myself mixed up in these things, see?" Suddenly he was through, evidently fearing

he had said too much. He shuffled off. At that moment the room began to fill, and he was lost in the crowd.

Among the last to enter was the man whose face had seemed vaguely familiar. Marlowe felt certain now that he had known him sometime in the past, and he had a notion that the reason he had difficulty in placing him was that the man was considerably changed. He seemed to remember a more forceful personality, a look of power in the eyes which now held only defiance and furtiveness.

It was a small vanity of Marlowe's that he never forgot names or faces. So it disturbed him now that he couldn't recall this man's name, particularly as he experienced a vague repulsion toward him.

What *was* his name? Barstow? Baxter? Braxton? Something like that—began with a B, a name of two syllables. And the first name—Eben; Otto; Ely? What the devil was it?

The prisoner was led in. He was quieter now. Evidently during the recess he had been effectually subdued.

"Dr. Ezra Brandon," bawled the clerk, and Marlowe shot upright in his seat.

Ezra Brandon! Of course! That was the name! Brandon, the psychiatrist. Unpleasant? Rather! A crook, a quack—and as brilliant as they come. A psychiatrist who cured sick minds with a turn of the wrist; only, unfortunately, they didn't stay cured. What a career! Money, position, honors—and then barred from the practice of medicine in his home state. He had come to New York, opened an office, attained popular success, always cold-shouldered by the medical profession which considered his methods unorthodox, if not actually unethical. Yes, that was Brandon. Witness for the defense, eh? Well, he'd be damned!

By the time Brandon had reached the stand, all the old arrogance which Marlowe remembered in him had returned. As he took his seat, he looked over the room with complete assurance.

Brandon, it was immediately evident, was an exhibitionist with a flair for the limelight. He was a convincing speaker and obviously accustomed to court procedure. He practically conducted his own examination, throwing out leads which the lawyers followed without realizing they were being led to ask the very questions Brandon wished to answer.

Marlowe could not withhold his admiration. Where he had hesitated, this man walked confidently. In terse, clipped phrases he diagnosed the case and, reaching for the very heart of this most baffling of mental illnesses, dug into the prisoner's past for little telltale signs of deterioration, foreshadowing its almost inevitable outcome in a homicidal attack.

He's found the things I missed, Marlowe admitted to himself. *He may be a phony, but he's certainly a near genius.*

In vain did the prosecuting attorney fling himself against Brandon's testimony in an effort to break it down. Every question he hurled at the psychiatrist merely brought further corroboration of the prisoner's long-standing instability and of the inescapable conclusion that he was insane the night of the murder. Finally, mopping his face, the big man sank back into his chair.

With a jaunty air, Brandon stepped down, and as he came up the aisle, Marlowe caught on his face an odd expression, part smirk, part sneer. It seemed to the younger man that there was more than professional pride and scorn of lawyers in that smile; that there was personal satisfaction, as though it suited him to have the murderer proved insane.

Brandon was the last witness. Court was immediately recessed until nine-thirty the following morning.

The room emptied quickly. Marlowe managed to get into the elevator Brandon had taken, just before the doors closed.

Stepping from the elevator, Marlowe waited as the passengers filed out. Brandon came last. As their glances met, Marlowe saw recognition leap into the other's eyes, but instantly he hurried off through the lobby.

Sol! He doesn't know me, eh? Marlowe reflected. *What's the*

idea? Pride? Shame? Resentment at his treatment by the profession?

Marlowe went through his ward late that afternoon in his usual breezy style, as though mental illness were no more than, and no different from, a stomach ache—a manner reassuring to all concerned. But all the time there was a vague uneasiness at the back of his mind; a feeling that somehow he had missed something in court that day, something that was the key to a riddle.

His earlier doubts, temporarily quieted by the prisoner's unquestionably unbalanced conduct in court, but chiefly by Brandon's incontrovertible evidence, were beginning to revive. While listening to Brandon's testimony, he had been convinced that at the time of the murder Zecca had been insane. But now it was this very evidence that was stirring doubts in his mind. It struck him as too damn clever. The history of a mental illness was seldom so logical as Brandon had made this case out to be.

Besides, where did he dig up all those facts concerning Zecca's previous behavior? Even the prisoner's own lawyer had not known so much about him. True, nothing that Brandon had adduced in evidence but could have been learned by adroit questioning of the prisoner, yet no one else had been able to get these facts from him. . . . And then that smile as he left the witness stand—that cat-after-eating-canary expression.

That evening, as frequently, Marlowe dined with one of his colleagues, Dr. James Conrad, at a restaurant near the hospital, and afterward they went to Marlowe's place for a Scotch and soda. At dinner Marlowe had recapitulated the events of the day in court without drawing any words of help from his companion. Now, glass in hand, he strode up and down the living room of his bachelor apartment.

"It isn't that I don't admit every point in Brandon's evidence," he broke out irritably, "and it isn't that I mind being beaten by a better man—or is it? Perhaps we plodding fellows always have an underlying grudge, and distrust, for the clever

chaps, with whom psychiatry is a sort of legerdemain. Perhaps that's the basis of the medical profession's prejudice against Brandon—and the basis of mine. Perhaps it's really jealousy that makes me suspect the clever devil of—of what? I wouldn't know."

He dropped into a chair opposite his colleague, a youth of such shining blondness and so cherubic a countenance that his own mother wouldn't have trusted him. But behind that innocent façade lurked a mind sharper than a serpent's tooth.

Although the two men were about the same age, Marlowe, with his prematurely gray hair, looked several years older. His friendliness made him seem easy to know. After a few weeks' acquaintance you felt as though you'd known him all your life. But when you'd known him a year or so you were convinced you knew nothing whatever about him and never would. Eight-ninths of an iceberg, you recalled, was submerged.

His rooms gave the impression that several men of widely differing interests lived there. Over his desk was tacked his air pilot's license. Above the mantel hung a portrait of Conrad, original and vigorous, which he had recently painted. Beneath it stood the model he had made of a sailboat. One wall was covered with photographs of his which had taken prizes in amateur photography shows. The other three walls were lined, two with medical books and the third with what he called "the terminal moraine of a sloppy mind"—French novels, detective stories, and pocket-book editions.

"Trouble with me is that I have a lot of curiosity and very little discrimination," he'd say.

He got several laps ahead of other people in the sleep he didn't take. He never got more than five hours' sleep, and usually less.

Now, sipping their drinks, neither of the two men spoke. At last Marlowe broke out, "Am I being occult, Connie? Or do you, too, smell a rat? For God's sake, say something!"

Dr. Conrad placed his glass on the table beside him. "Large rodent," he nodded. "Very large, smelly rodent." He rose and

leaned an elbow on the mantel. "I don't know your Dr. Brandon, of course. He was quite a guy in his day, wasn't he? Psychiatrist-in-chief of a big hospital in the Middle West; cited for distinguished service in World War I; medals from foreign governments? A short time ago I met a woman at a dinner party, patient of his, very mysterious, didn't want to talk about her treatment. Seemed to have a fixation on the old bird."

Marlowe nodded. "That's the usual story. His patients believe in him blindly. That in itself can work miracles, as we know. But if and when disillusionment comes, then you've got tragedy. All that doesn't prove there's anything off-color this time. He was called in just as I was. Diagnosed the case better than any of us. Nothing phony about that part of it. Well, then, what's wrong?"

Conrad told off his points on the fingers of one hand with the forefinger of the other. "What's wrong is this. One, did you ever know of a mentally ill person who pretended to be unbalanced during his lucid intervals? Two, where did Brandon get his information about Zecca's previous instability? He admits he never saw the prisoner but once—in prison—and that then Zecca was completely disoriented. None of Zecca's acquaintances or relatives had ever noticed any signs of emotional imbalance in him. Third, Brandon explained the murder as being perpetrated during an attack of homicidal mania brought on by Zecca's discovery that the girl had been unfaithful to him. How could he know that? Zecca's lawyer could never get any proof from him that he'd ever met the girl before that night. Well, how did Brandon get this information?"

"He probably got it out of Zecca by more skillful probing."

"Rats! Any information *you* can't get out of a screwball you could put on the head of a pin. Fourth, Brandon stated that Zecca could not, in the nature of his illness, have had those periods of lucidity you and others claimed he had; that you must have missed the little signs of mental illness. Do you believe that?"

"Could be," said Marlowe. "I hope twenty years will teach

me something. He's got that much on me." He strolled over to the window. "Well, what's his game? I've told myself all those things you've mentioned, and it gets me nowhere. Where's the rat we both smell?"

"Well"—tentatively—"he could be getting a fee from Zecca's relatives."

"Even so, he's still right. He didn't invent Zecca's illness. It was there—only I missed it. He certainly showed me up."

"You don't think maybe you're having a touch of paranoia with the inevitable persecution complex?"

"Look here," Marlowe said suddenly, "I don't intend to be beaten by a charlatan, as that bird certainly is. This is one of the most important problems of psychiatry—determining the degree of responsibility of the criminal. And then there's the human problem: the murderer himself. What of him? It's almost impossible for the layman to sympathize with those whose minds are so distorted, but if a psychiatrist can't pierce to the humanity in them, he'd better take up practical horseshoeing. I felt something stirring beneath Zecca's madness, as though his humanity could still be reached. So it's up to me. But how?"

"If I could take him unawares; catch him off guard; perhaps rouse him suddenly from sleep. What about that, eh? That might do it. By jove, I believe that *would* do it! So why not tonight—now—this very minute!" He strode to the telephone, picked up the receiver.

"They won't let you go to him now, will they?"

"So it's unorthodox! The devil with that! Illegal? Okay. Impossible? Good! I'm going to wangle it if I have to go to the governor!" He dialed a number.

At eleven-thirty that evening a key was slipped into the lock of the door to the prison cell and Dr. Marlowe entered. Only a faint light from the corridor picked out the cot on which the prisoner lay. Marlowe switched on the overhead light, but the prisoner did not waken. His face, seen from above, had the

hard, bony look of a skull. Slowly it began to pucker as though, sleeping, he were crying.

Marlowe leaned over and shook him. Slowly he struggled awake. When he saw the doctor, fear leaped into his eyes. Then he laughed, loudly and off key.

"The nut doctor again, eh? Well, what's up now? Trying to see if I'm crazy in my sleep?" He sat up, edged toward the foot of the bed, reached for his clothes.

"There were one or two points I wanted to clear up," said Marlowe, sitting down in the chair by the cot. "It came to me that we might have done you an injustice." Zecca, without rising, was struggling into his trousers. "You don't want to be put away for life, do you?"

Zecca paused, and a crafty expression stole over his face. "Who said anything about life? Loonies like me can be cured nowadays. You docs got insulin and electric shocks and—anyway, so I been told." Suddenly, as though recollecting a role, he was silent, giving his visitor one of those sidelong glances of suspicion characteristic of the insane.

"Yes, we have treatments," Marlowe nodded. "But I had a feeling we might have exaggerated the seriousness of your symptoms. You see, I have some peculiar views about criminals."

"Oh, yeah? Well, I'm no criminal, see? They proved that in court today. I was *non compos mentis* when I—when it happened. I don't remember a thing about it, see?"

Marlowe continued as though there had been no interruption. "I never feel sorry for a criminal once he has confessed or sentence has been pronounced. No. For then I have almost always seen a wonderful thing happen. They don't act like men condemned, but like men released; as though the prison doors had suddenly been flung open and they had walked out into sunshine. Do you know when I feel sorry for them?"

His eyes came back to Zecca's face. The furtive hand, moving toward his coat, was now withdrawing, tightly clenched.

"I feel sorry for them when I see them struggling to escape

the just punishment for their deeds, sweating in the dock, lying, belying the courage that makes them men. Then they are in agony, paralyzed by fear, tortured like animals in a trap."

Zecca's lips moved but no sound came. Marlowe laid a hand on his knee.

"That's why I came here tonight. My conscience troubled me. I felt we had not done the right thing by you. We doctors had got you let off your just punishment. And no criminal should ever be let off his punishment—for his own sake. He is guilty; he knows he should be punished. Do you know what I believe?" He looked straight into the man's unguarded eyes. "I believe that *the criminal has a right to his punishment.*"

The man's face was now almost childishly vulnerable. It was clear that he knew that what the doctor was saying was true. His fist, held close to his leg, relaxed.

Holding out his hand, Dr. Marlowe said, "Let me see what you have there."

Automatically, Zecca raised his hand, half opened it, then with a wild jeer flung himself up, and from the bed, threw back his head, and was about to pour something into his mouth when Marlowe struck his hand away. A small white paper floated to the floor.

Recovering it, Marlowe smelled and tasted the few grains of white powder still clinging to the folds. He turned to Zecca, who had dropped on the bed, his head in his hands.

"You know what this drug is?"

"Sure. Mescaline."

"A drug which swiftly, and for periods up to twelve hours, produces the symptoms of insanity—no, insanity itself. So this is what you've been taking, eh?"

Into the eyes which rose to meet Marlowe's, fear and suspicion were once more gathering. "Smart guy, eh? And now I suppose you expect me to tell you where I got it? Not a chance!"

"You don't need to tell me. I know."

"Says you!" jeered Zecca. "You think you got me now, huh? Well——"

"No," said Marlowe, "I haven't got you. That's not why I came here. I came here to help you. There are some things worse than death. I think you know that."

"I'm not going to the chair! I'm not guilty. You can't make *me* talk!"

"Whether it is to me or to someone else, you know you will talk. You want to." Marlowe sat down. "Why not to me—now?" Something he had seen once before that night in the man's eyes was there again; a look he had often seen in the eyes of those patients on whom he was consciously imposing his own will. Suddenly he leaned forward and said, "Brandon hypnotized you, didn't he?"

"Brandon!" whispered the other. "Brandon!" The very name seemed to hypnotize him. He flung a hand across his eyes. "Don't you try it!" he screamed. "Don't try any of your dirty tricks on me!"

"I couldn't hypnotize you, if that's what you mean, unless you were willing."

"Get out of here!" screamed Zecca. "I don't have to stand for this. Get out!"

"Very well," said Marlowe, rising. "But now that your insanity plea is squashed, you'd better think about your next move. What will you plead now?"

"I'll plead—I'll plead—" Zecca slumped forward, his head in his arms. Marlowe sat down before him.

"Look, this is how it happened, isn't it?" he said softly. "You had heard of this man Brandon. There was something for which you needed a doctor, a psychiatrist. You had heard stories from the people he cured. They told you about those hypodermics which every patient was given. You didn't know what was in them—no one did—but they made you feel better, released from fear, able to do anything. You discovered that the very first time you went to his office."

Zecca's face, lifting slowly, was filled with awe. "How did you know?"

"After the hypodermic," continued Marlowe, "came the interview. The moment he looked at you, even before he spoke, you felt that this man had the power to help you. Why had you gone to him? What was the trouble about which you felt you needed to see a psychiatrist? I think I can tell you." He paused, and Zecca's eyes clung to his. "It began when you were a boy. Smoking marijuana led to stronger drugs. You were an addict."

"Who told you, Doc?" whispered Zecca. "No one knew—not even my own people."

"Wait. Brandon laughed when you asked him if there was any hope for you. Cure you? He snapped his fingers—*like that!* Come to see him next week. Better still, come next Saturday when there was going to be a testimonial meeting of people he'd already cured. By the way, had you noticed that young fellow in the waiting room—tall, skinny, pimple-faced? Three months ago he'd been a hopeless addict. Now he was cured—practically. And you'd see a girl at the meeting on Saturday. . . . You made an appointment."

The spell which had held Zecca snapped. He spoke slowly, threateningly. "You quit reading my mind and get—to—hell—out—of—here!"

"Don't be a fool, Zecca. I can't read your mind. I'm just a doctor."

"Then how do you know?"

"Well, I happen to know Brandon and how he works. When I examined you there were no signs of your having been an addict. But a friend of yours, whom I met in court this morning—oh, what does it matter? That's not the point. The point is, what are you going to do, now that I know? Listen, Zecca"—he pushed him gently down on the cot—"let's work this out together. Now, then. You went to Brandon's office regularly. As soon as you came in, the nurse gave you a piqûre. It soothed and relaxed you. You were in a submissive frame of mind.

"You sat on a couch and he talked to you. He made you feel

sure he was the one man in the world who could help you. He gave you something to take when you felt the need of dope. It worked. But at the end of the month, the time he had set for your cure, you still couldn't do without it. You needed more help, strength you couldn't find in yourself.

"So one day he hypnotized you. When you went home, you threw your cache of dope down the drain. You didn't realize what you were doing until it was done. Every week after that he hypnotized you. You were cured of the drug habit, but you had acquired another—the need of hypnosis. You were in his power." Marlowe stopped. "I've talked enough," he smiled. "You carry on."

Zecca stumbled to his feet. "And if I don't talk?"

"Brandon will—when he's arrested."

"That b - - - ! He'd better talk loud and plenty." Zecca turned away, beating his palm against his forehead. Finally he flung around. "All right, I'll talk.

"That girl," he said, "the one who was killed—Eileen. She was Brandon's girl—one of them. An old man, but he had plenty of them. Some of them were his patients. He seemed to have a power over them, even without hypnotizing them. Funny atmosphere in that house. Always a woman upstairs; a different woman every little while. I've seen some of them. They were like sleepwalkers. Each one did as he told her—waited on him; served his meals; darned his socks; never went out. Pretty soon that one would go and there'd be another.

"There'd been a girl once who had committed suicide. One of the patients told me about her. She was a dancer—Alice Parker. When he turned her out and put another girl upstairs, she came back one day and hanged herself in her old room."

"I remember. Quite a scandal. A psychiatrist's patients aren't accountable. The girl was unbalanced."

"This Eileen, the one they say I killed, was his woman for maybe three, maybe four months. Pretty, kinda nice, but you wouldn't think a gentleman like him would fall for her. More my kind. Well, all of a sudden—this was about two months ago

—he was through with her. So he sends her packing and takes on a new one. But Eileen didn't take it quiet like most of them. Every day she comes back to the house, trying to see him. She wanted just one thing—to get back upstairs where she'd have him all to herself. Well, one day—" He came to a halt, twisted his hands till the joints cracked.

"Take it easy, old man," said Marlowe.

"Well," continued Zecca, "one day he caught her creeping up the stairs. She pulled a pistol out of her handbag, screaming that she was going to kill him and herself too, *up there*. She said if he didn't take her back, she'd wait for him and shoot him on his own doorstep. He couldn't go to the police—she knew too much. He was in a spot. So he gives her an appointment for the next afternoon 'to arrange things.' He has me in at the same time. I'd never met this girl before but he asked me to see her home. That happened a couple of times while he was stalling. I guess maybe he thought she might fall for me. But she didn't. She wanted just one thing—that old man. So then he saw he had to get rid of her.

"So one afternoon when he was giving me a treatment—hypnotism, you know—he must have told me what he wanted done. Afterward I felt the queer way I always did when he'd given me an order. And then, when I was awake, he said enough so I knew what he wanted. And I knew I had to do it.

"That night I did it. Maybe I knew what I was doing; maybe I didn't. I did some funny things. I swear to you, Doc, I never wanted that girl! I tell you most of it came out of that devil's head. He must have put it into my mind when he had me asleep. I never thought of things like—like"—his voice sank to a whisper—"you know what, Doc."

"I believe you. And then?"

"Well, he'd guaranteed to get me off if I was caught—that was when we were talking it over when I was awake. I was awake part of the time, you know. I admit that. But it was when I was under that he got his real power over me. Of course, if I hadn't

been a bad lot anyway, he probably couldn't have made me do it.

"He told me he had a drug that would make me act crazy as a coot. My lawyer would plead insanity. Then when they put me in the bughouse he'd give me treatments—pretend to, you know—and after a while he'd say I was cured and they'd let me out." For the first time he smiled. "You see it worked. Even you thought I was nuts."

Marlowe smiled back. "But it's better *this* way, isn't it?"

Zecca darkened. "Hell, how do I know? What will they do to me, Doc? They can't give me the chair, can they? They can't do *that!*" He shot up from the bed and screamed, "Well, damn it all, I had to do it, didn't I? I was in that devil's power. *I had to do it!* You don't know the power that man had over all of us!"

Marlowe rose and put an arm about his shoulder. "In the morning you'll feel much better, Zecca. You've done what you had to do." He pushed him gently down on the cot. At the door, he turned and said, "Sleep peacefully, my friend. The criminal shall have his punishment."

From the bed came the response: "That's all right with me, Doc, if you mean Brandon too."

"I mean Brandon too," said Marlowe, and closed the door softly.

Carnie Kill

From the pages of that admirable pulp, Black Mask, edited by the able Kenneth White, comes the only character series story included in this volume. Ben Corbett is the leg man from the office of the Attorney General, and his hunt for an embezzler takes him to the grounds of The Great Exposition Shows and into the lair of murder. . . . This story contains more striking local color than is to be found in most works of fiction, and Julius Long keeps it paced at the same high tempo from the first paragraph to the last.

THE fat lady said: "You're stepping on my corns!"

"So sorry," I told her, and squeezed on through the path Mike Morrow was clearing through the crowd. Mike was doing a good job of it. Burly farmers were forced aside by the wedging of his shoulders as he made his way toward the small platform on which the speaker held forth. The speaker was a middle-aged man with a leathery skin that glistened with perspiration. He was in shirtsleeves.

"So, ladies and gentlemen," he said, "just to prove that I'm no fake, come here to get your money and then skip out like a cheap, fly-by-night crook, I'm going to demonstrate this marvelous cleaning compound by pouring ink on this nice clean shirt of mine fresh from the laundry. Just watch!"

Like all the others, I watched. The man on the platform opened a bottle of ink, held out his arm, and proceeded to pour the contents of the bottle upon his shirtsleeve. He held his arm with the wrist down so that the ink ran down the sleeve, pretty well covering it. There were appreciative gasps in the carnival

crowd. The man on the platform smiled amusedly, then **his** glance fell on Mike Morrow and he grinned.

"*Hiazi, Miazike,*" he said. "*Wiazatch miazze tiazurn thiazis tiazipi!*"

I shot a look at Mike. He grinned.

"*Iazokiazay, Diazoc, giazio tiazio iazit!*"

I nudged Mike and said: "What the hell kind of lingo is that, monkey talk?"

The grin spread farther over Mike's broad face. He laughed.

"No, Ben. Doc Halliday was just riggin' the carnie. I answered him back in it, that's all."

"Riggin' the carnie? What do you mean by that?"

"Talking in carnie language. It's kind of a pig-latin all carnies use so they can talk to each other in a crowd without anybody getting wise to what they're saying. It's simple enough once you get to understand it."

"Yeah, once you get to understand it! What's the answer, the key, I mean? It's a kind of code, isn't it?"

"I suppose you could call it that. Here's what we do: we put the letters, i-a-z, before every vowel sound. Sometimes, when we're riggin' the carnie fast, we hit only the accented vowel syllables, skipping the others. Any oldtime carnie can understand it."

"I'll take your word for that. But you could tell me anything about this carnival world of yours, and I'd believe it. I never dreamed that such a world apart existed."

Mike laughed, and in a way that made it apparent he took me for a country bumpkin. I didn't like it. Here I was, chief investigator in the office of Burton H. Keever, Attorney General. Before that, when Keever had been Capital County's dashing D.A., I had been his personal troubleshooter. I felt that I'd covered a lot of territory, boulevards and back alleys, and I didn't fancy being patronized by Mike Morrow, whom I'd always looked upon as one of life's stepchildren.

Mike had run away from home to join a carnival when we'd both been kids in high school. His family never spoke about

him. They'd been respectable people—Mike's father ran a drug-store—and when his son had tied up with a "doctor" selling snake oil, it had been too much. I hadn't seen Mike since he'd run away, and never expected to see him again. Then, this evening, when I'd traveled to Millerstown to take a look at The Great Exposition Shows, I'd run into Mike right off.

I'd neglected to mention that I was a dick in the A.G.'s office. Nor did I mention the fact that I was working on the first hot lead we'd had in the Stillwell case. I just let Mike think I was a visiting fireman looking for a little diversion on the carnival lot. And Mike never questioned it. The contemptuous, pitying look he'd given me along with his laugh told me that in his eyes I was just another "mark," the carnival word for any prospective sucker.

I covered up my resentment. I wanted to cultivate Mike and learn more about carnival lingo. Such knowledge might come in handy.

"What did the spieler on the platform say to you, Mike?"

"He said: 'Hi, Mike, watch me turn this tip.'"

"That is still meaningless to me."

Mike laughed deprecatingly at such a display of ignorance.

"This is the tip," he explained. "It's the crowd we're in. When the time is ripe to turn it, Doc Halliday will. It's a treat to watch him—he's the best pitchman in the business."

"And what's a pitchman?"

"That's the guy you called the spieler, the guy who sells the stuff. Now, you just watch Doc and you'll see an artist. When it comes to rad, he's in a class all by himself."

"Rad? What's that?"

"Carnie for spot-eradicator. Watch Doc."

Doc Halliday, still perspiring in the humidity of the summer evening, had been delivering a rapid-fire discourse on the unparalleled effectiveness of his product which he called Marvelo. He had been applying the stuff to his ink-soaked shirt and, marvelously, the ink stains were disappearing!

"Say!" I said, turning with enthusiasm to Mike. "That stuff's really got something! That ink's almost gone!"

Mike laughed out of the corner of his mouth.

"Ben, it's plain to be seen that you've been living pretty far back in the country. Do you think Doc could sell rad that was good for a buck a bottle? He buys the junk in that bottle for four cents. It wouldn't clean the dust off the linoleum."

"But look! I'm seeing it with my own eyes!"

Mike laughed. "You dope! Before Doc took his pitch he soaked his sleeve in some real rad that he'd had made up at a drugstore. Any druggist can make up a spot remover that can't be beat, but it's expensive as hell. Doc's soaked it into his sleeve, and now he can rub off the ink spots just with a wet rag. About all you can say for Marvelo is that it will wet a rag!"

Gasps of astonishment and appreciation were audible all about me.

"It's ripe!" Mike said breathlessly. "The marks are ready! Watch Doc turn this tip for a couple hundred!"

It was something to watch. When Doc Halliday "turned the tip," that is, started selling his bottled product, the crowd surged forward, clawing each other in an attempt to buy Marvelo. I lost count of the bottles. One assistant worked into the crowd, another shoved out bottles beside Doc Halliday and accepted the proffered dollar bills. In a matter of minutes nearly the entire crowd had been made happy with purchases of the magic fluid.

"*Hiazelp miazee, Miazike,*" said Halliday out the corner of his mouth. "*Diazo iaza liazittle shiazill.*"

At least that's what he said, though I couldn't have spelled it out then and there to save my soul. I turned in silent wonder to Mike.

"Come on," he said. "Doc asked me to help him out and do a little shilling. The crowd's thinning, and some of the skeptics need a little encouragement. If we shill, that is, make some purchases, it'll start a new buying spree. You can help, too. Do you mind?"

I said I didn't. Mike slipped me a buck, and we went up and each bought a bottle of Marvelo. As he handed over his dollar, Mike said in a loud voice that it was the best stuff he'd ever seen, that he'd bought a bottle a couple of days before and it had done wonders. Doc Halliday then told him in an equally loud voice that he'd better buy all he could before the price went up to two dollars. It seemed that he was just introducing the stuff for DuPont.

Then Mike spoke suddenly in a strained voice.

"Liazook iazat yiazour sliazeve!"

Doc Halliday looked down at his sleeve. Others in the crowd had already noticed. They were backing away, their bucolic faces grim with suspicion. All the ink stains had come back in Halliday's sleeve.

"That just goes to show you, ladies and gentlemen," said Halliday without hesitation, "what happens when you buy shirts made from these cheap wartime goods."

And then he went on with his sales talk. I watched with my mouth open like any yokel. Believe it or not, before Halliday had finished, he had sold another twenty bottles of Marvelo!

Perspiring more heavily than ever, he climbed down off his platform, took in sheaves of dollar bills from his helpers. He watched the incoming bills with hawklike eyes. I knew he had kept a perfect check on every sale, and evidently his helpers knew it, for there were no arguments. Then Mike introduced me to Halliday.

A pair of narrowly peering eyes looked me over shrewdly. Then, hardly moving his lips, Halliday said: *"Thiazis giazuy iaza diazick!"*

He said it fast, but the last syllable of the last word was enough. Halliday, ten seconds after being introduced to me, had spotted me as a dick.

I tried to look innocent when Mike laughed it off.

"Hell, no, Doc!" he answered in plain English. "This is just an old pal of mine."

But Halliday still looked me over.

"I'll be taking back my money now," said Mike. He handed over his bottle of Marvelo and gestured that I should hand Halliday mine. Halliday accepted the bottles and forked over two dollars. He thanked us for the shilling, and we moved on.

It was a fair-sized carnival. There were half a dozen rides. Maybe I've succumbed to carnie lingo enough not to make myself clear—in a carnival or an amusement resort a "ride" can be anything from a merry-go-round to a ferris wheel. A carnival with a half a dozen rides is no mean affair, for a ride costs folding money, especially with a war on.

Here and there a pitchman would be at work, selling automobile polish or snake oil. Mike caught my sleeve before one pitch, where a bushy-haired man was extolling the virtues of a bottled panacea. The old boy had a professional sound—he actually brought the bedside manner to a carnival pitch.

"Fine pitchman," said Mike admiringly. "Old Doc Jones is just about the best med man in the business."

By this time I was sufficiently hep and I didn't have to be told that a "med man" was a pitchman who sold medicines. We moved on. Mike led me over to a tent before which hung the banner of a palmist.

"While you're on the lot, I want you to meet a special kind of a special pal of mine, Joe Davis. Some guy, Joe."

At our approach a small gypsy boy ran into the tent. At once a fat man with glistening black hair came out. His face was wreathed in a smile at the sight of Mike. They exchanged friendly greetings, and the fat man complained about business. Mike laughed in the fat man's face and introduced us. The man was Joe Davis.

He looked me over—suspiciously. His eyes questioned Mike, who shrugged his assurance. The fat man looked relieved. I was just a mark, a harmless friend of Mike's. Then I saw the palmist. She was nearly as fat as Davis. He saw the direction of my gaze, looked around, surveyed the palmist, and grunted: "My wife."

A girl came down the midway and halted at the palmist's

tent. She appeared to be a gypsy; she was dressed, at least, in gypsy garb. She was just about the most beautiful brown-skinned gal I'd ever had a look at, no exceptions necessary. I looked at Mike.

He grinned. "Reena," he called, "come over and meet a friend of mine. Ben, this is Reena. Reena's Joe's daughter."

Reena smiled, showing perfect white teeth. Her eyes glistened like a child's, but her smile was as perfectly controlled as that of an actress. She looked as if she knew all the answers in the back of the book and some that didn't come with it. Mike made a little more small talk, and again we moved down the midway.

A "buried-alive" show caught my eye. The barker was telling the world that a living man had been buried alive under six feet of ground for four days, ever since the carnival opened. He would answer questions about his predicament for one dime, ten cents. I couldn't get my mind off the beauteous Reena.

"That doll, gypsy or no gypsy, she's got everything! Where do those people come from, Moravia or Bohemia?"

Mike's laugh made it clear that he didn't think me quite bright.

"Gypsy, my eye! I've never met a real gypsy in America. All the ones I've ever known have been South American Indians. Joe's people for example, come from Peru. Passing as gypsies is their racket. When people patronize a mitt joint they expect to find a gypsy fortune teller. That's just a gag."

I laughed. "So you call a palmist's establishment a mitt joint?"

Mike looked puzzled. "Why not? It's a shorter name than the one you used."

I didn't argue. "Look here, Mike, you seem to know all of these people plenty well, and they look up to you. What do you do around here?"

"Oh," said Mike carelessly, "I just run the joint. The owner happens to be a girl and pretty green to the business. Her old

man dropped off a few months back. He was Doc Hennesy, a pitchman for fifty years."

I dropped my eyes quickly. I dared not look up as I said: "The girl's name?"

"Mary. I'm going to take you to meet her now."

It was a break. I had come to Millerstown and The Great Exposition Shows for the sole purpose of meeting Mary Hennesy.

If my information was correct, Mary Hennesy was the only person in the world who could lead me to Dave Stillwell. As chief investigator in the office of the Attorney General, I was particularly interested in Dave's whereabouts—and the hundred thousand dollars he had walked out with when he had informally resigned as state treasurer.

It may seem incredible that in this day of scientific accounting, any man, even a state treasurer, can embezzle that much money. But Dave Stillwell had, and his masterpiece of false accounting had been inspired by a woman.

"Her name's Mary Carter," Keever, my boss, had told me a couple of months before, right after Stillwell had walked out and the examiners had belatedly found the thousands of false entries. "Who Mary Carter is or where she came from is something nobody seems to know. All we know is that Dave Stillwell fell for her. He always was a whiz with the women—I suppose that's why he went wrong. He's a bachelor, and he just had too much temptation thrown his way."

"You think he's spent all he's embezzled, then?"

Keever had shaken his leonine head.

"The examiners say he pulled off one final big haul before he took a powder. They think he was pulling fast ones with the books for years, but nothing more than chicken feed. My guess is that he decided to throw over everything for this Mary Carter. I want you to nail him before she takes him for all that dough."

I had shrugged. "Mexico is a big country."

"Sure, but I've a hunch Stillwell never will go there. This girl seems to be the kind who likes the bright lights. You might try New York. Or the West Coast. Even Miami. The summer isn't here yet."

It hadn't been then, but it sure was now. I'd got in a lot of traveling, following up false leads and getting nowhere except where a train would carry me. I'd got so I couldn't bear to think of riding in a train. Once I'd stood up all the way from Florida. People are nuts to travel.

One thing was funny. Nobody had a single photo of Mary Carter. The only thing everybody agreed on about her looks was that she was the loveliest blonde off a Petty drawing board. That didn't help much. I found out that every city, resort, even village hamlet has at least one voluptuous blonde. There may not be enough of them, but they're sure scattered around.

Still no Stillwell. Then, today, only a few hours ago, Kever had excitedly called me into his inner sanctum.

"Ben, I think I've got the lead that'll break this thing!" He didn't have to say what it was—only one thing had been on his official mind for the past two months. "Look at this, Ben."

I had looked at the telegram Kever handed me. There were only a few words. They were: STILLWELL WITH THE GREAT EXPOSITION SHOWS. SEE MARY HENNESY. It was signed, RICHARD ROE.

"Don't you get it?" Kever had asked excitedly. "Mary Hennesy is Mary Carter! Dave Stillwell's been hiding out with her at a carnival, of all places! Hell, he may be the bearded lady!"

"And Richard Roe may be a crank," I had minimized. "I don't know why you should get so high over an anonymous telegram."

"I've got a hunch! Anyway, it won't hurt to investigate. I've already found that The Great Exposition Shows are playing this week in Millerstown. I want you to hike down there and find out if there's anything to this."

The one good thing about it was that Millerstown was only seventy miles from the state capital, and I'd been able to pro-

mote the stamps to drive. But I hadn't really expected to run down anything until now. Mike Morrow had really given me quite a boot when he'd mentioned Mary Hennesy's name. And now he was leading me to her!

"It's certainly nice of you," I said, "to show me around like this."

Mike looked at me, then chuckled.

"Of course, Ben, I always liked you, but the fact is that even if you were some kid I'd never liked back home, I'd still try to show you around and make you feel at home. You can't imagine what a treat it is for a guy like me to see somebody he went to high school with."

Mike's eyes actually welled with tears. He grinned derisively at his show of emotion.

"Damn it all, I figure I never got a square break with my old man. Years ago the show was playing near Freeport, and I ran over to see him—even though he'd never got in touch with me when Mom died, although he had a way to reach me all the time. I decided I'd try to make it up with him.

"I stopped outside the store and looked in the store window. There was Dad stacking a patent medicine up on the shelf. It happened to be a med that we were selling in the show right over in Freeport. Doc Halliday was selling it at the time. He was buying it for five cents the bottle and squawking his head off because he had to pay that much when he was only getting a dollar. Dad was getting a dollar-ninety-eight right in the store. The only difference was the stuff had the trade name on it instead of the carnie name.

"Well, looking through the window at Dad, packing that crap onto his shelves, I thought, what the hell, why should I go crawling to him? Let him go on selling junk in his own little smug way, making speeches at the Rotary about business ethics and other words he didn't know the meaning of. So I turned on my heel and went back to Freeport and the show, and I haven't thought much about Dad since. Only it's nice seeing you from the old home town."

We had reached a big tandem trailer. Flicking a tear out of his eye, Mike rapped on the door. There was a few seconds' wait, then the door opened.

"Mary," said Mike, "this is my old pal, Ben Corbett. Ben, meet my boss."

I said hello or something—I'll never be sure, because one look at Mary Hennesy was like going over the Falls in a barrel. On account of the heat she was wearing a wrap of something; anyway it didn't fit tight enough in some places and much too tight in others. I noticed this as she asked us inside. I was still numb by the time she'd fished three bottles of beer out of the kitchenette cooler and poured them out in frosted glasses.

"This is an occasion," she said. "In all the years I've known Mike, you're the first man he ever introduced me to as a friend. He treats carnies as though they'd pick his pockets if they could get the chance. He's always acting upstage with us. I guess his people were respectable or something."

Mike said something about her being all wrong, and mechanically I crossed my legs. Mary Hennesy crossed her legs, and they were very white and beautiful. She noticed me looking at them and smiled.

"It's quite a carnival you have here," I said stupidly.

She nodded. "And quite a responsibility, too. When I took over after Dad's death, the show was way in the red. I didn't get in the clear until this spring. Then Mike here was able to find me a backer with plenty of dough. It was a lifesaver, and I'll never forget it, Mike."

Mike's look said: *Why, think nothing of it.* I was thinking maybe Mike hadn't had very much to do with getting that backer after all. It seemed pretty safe to bet that a good chunk of Dave Stillwell's hundred grand was tied up in The Great Exposition Shows.

"Do all these people work for you?" I asked, perhaps tactlessly.

But immediately, Mary Hennesy said: "No, some of the pitches pay rent for the season. We—that is, Mike here—arranges

for all the show's schedules, and the pitchmen just tag along. But the rides I own. Also the freak show and a few others."

I said I could see how that was indeed quite a responsibility, and I wondered just what shows were included in "the others." Downtown in Millerstown I'd picked up a few rumors about some of the games played on the midway. I gathered that some of Mary Hennesy's—that is, Mike's—responsibilities involved greasing the local law.

"Will you boys have another beer?" Mary asked, and I shook my head.

"Thanks, but I've got some reports to get out back at the hotel. I'm a traveling man, you know."

"No, I didn't know," said Mike, studying me. "Come to think of it, I've done all the talking. What's your line, Ben?"

"I handle hardware," I said truthfully, for the usual .38 was under my belt. It was painful wearing a coat buttoned up on a night like this, but there was no help for it. A guy with a hundred grand might put up a hell of a battle trying to keep it.

"Well, you must come back again," said Mary Hennesy, "if you're in town tomorrow night. I've got a whole box full of beer."

I said I'd certainly be back, and I was plenty glad of the opening. Tonight it would be wise to leave early—there was no point in seeming nosy.

Outside the trailer I whistled.

"Boy, what a woman! I never saw such curves!"

Mike didn't laugh. "Don't get any ideas, Ben. Mary shows a lot of skin, but that's all. She's strictly on the north side of the Frigid Zone. I ought to know."

I shot him a glance. He had it bad. That meant I'd have to play carefully. If Mike ever suspected that I'd make trouble for Mary Hennesy, he'd break me in half. He was big enough to do it.

Mike had stopped. A man was running up to him.

"Well?" Mike asked.

"It's Louie. He's got the cramps again. We had to chase out the house and close."

Mike looked very much put out. He turned to me. "He's talking about the buried-alive show. Louie, the guy we bury, has been having cramps. When he has them we have to give the crowd an excuse so he can come out. This is the pay-off tonight. After this week I'll get another man."

I looked puzzled. "Did you say he comes out? I thought they actually buried those guys."

Mike impatiently twisted his face. "Do you think any guy's crazy enough for that? We use a tunnel. Louie has plenty of room to crawl out into the next tent, a ring game. Come on, I'll let you meet Louie."

Mike led me by the back way into the tent adjacent to the buried-alive show. An emaciated little man sat crouched and shivering on a kitchen chair. He looked up guiltily as he saw Mike.

"I'm sorry about this, Mike. Only them cramps came on me, and I just couldn't stand it. I had to come out."

"Sure," said Mike. "What you need is a long rest. After this week I'll put you onto something else. You'll get over your cramps."

The little man jumped up, his face wracked with pain.

"Please, Mike, don't do that! I'm ready to go back now! Look, I'm all right!"

The little man took a step. Then he cried out in agony and fell sprawling on the ground. He sobbed. Mike shot a glance at the messenger who had brought him. The man went to Louie and picked him up.

"Come on, Louie. You got to turn in. The hell with the show! It wasn't doing so hot anyway."

Louie whimpered as he was helped out of the tent.

Mike looked at me a little guiltily and laughed.

"I had to do it, Ben. The guy would kill himself eventually. He wanted to keep the job awful bad because it pays well. But it takes a tough man."

We left the tent. The buried-alive show was dark.

"Well, Mike, thanks for showing me around. I'll be getting back to my hotel."

"Why the hurry, Ben? Better stop into my office for a snort."

Mike's office was in a trailer similar to Mary Hennesy's. It was well equipped with filing cabinets, business machines, and other office paraphernalia. Mike fished a bottle out of a desk drawer.

"The carnival business must be a big one, Mike."

"Sure. This summer Mary'll clean up her debts. Her old man made a lot out of the show, only he drank like a fish and threw it around. He was a sucker for the gambling joints everywhere he went."

Mike had good liquor. When he offered a second drink I accepted. I was nursing it when there was a rap on the door. Mike got up, opened it, then stepped outside. There was a hushed conversation. When Mike came back he looked worried.

"Something's come up, Ben. Sorry to have to rush you off. You can come back tomorrow."

"Sure." Through the open doorway I saw the staring black eyes of the gypsy girl, Reena. They were frightened eyes. I walked out past her, smiling. She didn't smile. I went back down the midway and mixed with the crowd. Mike made a beeline to the buried-alive tent. The girl, Reena, accompanied him. They went inside the tent. I moved through the crowd, reached the tent, and stepped inside.

Mike was standing over the six-inch pipe which gave a view to the "grave" below. Reena saw me first. She nudged Mike. He looked up and frowned.

"Oh, hello, Ben. I thought——"

I walked over to the pipe.

"Let's see what you've got."

Mike hesitated, then shrugged and moved aside.

"You'll wish you hadn't."

I peered down the pipe. There was a screen across the top, but the light was good below, and I could recognize the face

immediately. The man down there was Dave Stillwell. Unlike his predecessor, he hadn't been buried alive. Even through the pipe, I could see that he was very dead.

I looked up at Mike. "Know the guy?"

He shook his head. "Never saw him before in my life."

"Who found him here?"

"Joe did. Joe Davis. He sent Reena."

"Where's Joe now?"

Mike looked at Reena. She shrugged her lovely shoulders. I said to Mike: "Get me Davis."

He eyed me strangely. "You sound like you're trying to give me orders, Ben. I'm boss here. I'm calling the cops."

I got out my badge. "I'm all the law you need. I'm out of the Attorney General's office, and I came here looking for Stillwell. That's Stillwell down there, Dave Stillwell. Maybe you read about him in the papers."

Mike's eyes had widened at the sight of my badge, and they grew even larger now.

"Well, what do you know about that!" Mike's eyes narrowed. "What made you think you'd find Stillwell here?"

"That can keep. Now, get me Davis."

Mike turned to Reena. "*Giazo iazand giazet yiazour fiazather.*"

He said it fast, but I understood. I was satisfied. Reena walked out of the tent.

I assumed what I hoped was a businesslike manner and asked Mike: "What was Davis doing here?"

"He was storing some stuff. The show was closed, and he needed the space. See?"

He pointed at a trunk. I said: "Anybody else besides Davis and the girl know about this?"

"No. Joe sent Reena to me right away. Maybe he's told his wife by now."

We waited two minutes. When Reena came back she looked puzzled.

"*Diazad's niazot hiazere,*" she told Mike. "*Miazamiaza thiazinks hiazee's tiazakiazzen iaza piazowdiazee.*"

Translated, this was: "Dad's not here. Mama thinks he's taken a powder."

I faced Mike. "What did she say?"

Mike hesitated, then answered. "Reena thinks her old man's run out on us."

"Now why would he do a thing like that?"

Mike looked at Reena, whose eyes pleaded with him. He shook his head.

"Sorry, Reena, but this is murder. I've got to tell him." Mike spoke to me. "Joe once had some trouble. A stabbing. He did time. It's a cinch he lost his nerve and took it on the lam after he found the body in the grave."

I said: "Thanks for telling me." The girl turned suddenly and ran from the tent.

"Now I'll have to square myself with the whole damn family," Mike growled. "Carnies don't like guys with lip. In their book I'll be a squealer."

"Sorry I'm making trouble for you, Mike. Is there a phone on the lot?"

"No. The nearest one's at a filling station down the street."

"Okay. Now, do me a favor. Put a man on guard here at the tent and another at the tent next door to see that nobody touches anything inside that tunnel. Will you do that?"

"Sure. And you can do me a favor. Keep the local cops out of our hair. This thing can raise hell with the show."

"I'll do my best."

That I meant, for the local cops could raise hell with my own show—rather, Keever's. Maybe you haven't heard about my ambitious boss. If you haven't, that isn't his fault. He's really got serious political aspirations. In the first place, he's blessed with a postage-stamp face. Secondly and mainly, he's got a real genius for taking public credit for somebody else's work, usually mine. So keeping the local cops out of the limelight and handling the Stillwell case before they could intervene was

going to be almost as important, if not more so, than cracking the case itself.

Keever was at his country club when I got him long distance. I gave him the news.

"Good heavens!" he groaned. "With Stillwell dead, we may never find the money!"

"True. But with Stillwell dead, we've got to find his murderer. Let's hope we find the money in the same place."

"You found the girl?"

"Sure. Uses the name Mary Hennesy. I haven't got her story yet."

"Well, get it. I'll be driving right down."

I didn't call the local cops. I went back to the carnival lot and made my way to Mary Hennesy's trailer. Only a dim light showed around the edge of the drawn shades. I rapped on the door.

From within came an impatient: "Who is it?"

"Ben Corbett. It's important."

"I told you to come back tomorrow night. I've gone to bed."

"I said it's important. I must talk to you."

There was a pause. Then: "All right, all right. Wait till I put something on."

It was only eleven-thirty. From the midway, not far distant, came the din of half a dozen public address systems, music boxes. And then there was the crowd's muffled roar.

When Mary Hennesy finally opened the door, I said: "How can you sleep with all this racket?"

"Carnival people get used to it." She eyed me suspiciously. "What's so important that you've got to see me about?"

"A little matter of murder."

Her eyes widened. She stepped back. I climbed into the trailer. Mary Hennesy was wearing the same wrap and with the same effect. She eyed me intently.

"Murder on the lot?"

"That's it. Haven't you talked to Mike?"

"No. He knows?"

"Sure, I figured he'd come to you first."

"Not Mike. He runs the show—that's what I pay him for. It wouldn't be like him to bother me tonight, even about murder."

"You've got a lot of confidence in him, haven't you?"

"Why not? He worked for Dad. The only time Dad would ever let me stay with the carnival was two weeks in the summer, and then he wouldn't show me the ropes. I've got to lean on Mike. This murder—it's on the level?"

"Very much so. The victim happens to be a friend of yours, Dave Stillwell."

It caught her as I had planned. Her knees buckled. She sagged back onto the trailer cot. Her mouth hung open.

"Suppose you tell me the whole story." I flashed my badge, figuring that the timing was pretty good. Mary stared at it dumbly, and I added: "I'm from the Attorney General's office. I came here on a lead that tied you with Stillwell. You've been harboring him, haven't you?"

"No—no! I haven't seen him since—since . . ."

"Since when?"

"It was when I met him in Capital City last spring. At the time I was trying to borrow seventy-five thousand dollars to open the show. Dad had left so many debts. Stillwell was pointed out as a man who could loan me the money to re-finance."

"By whom?"

"Doc Halliday, a pitchman with the show."

"Did he put up the dough?"

"No. I spent ever so many evenings with him and put up with—with . . ."

"I know, I know. Stillwell was always like that."

"Well, I didn't like it. I was desperate for the money, but finally I slapped Mr. Stillwell's face for him and sent him packing. It was a foolish thing to do—Mike said we had twenty-four hours to raise the money or else."

"But you raised it?"

"Sure. Doc Halliday put up the money."

"Halliday? That carnival pitchman? Where would he get seventy-five grand?"

"Out of the bank. In case you don't know it, Doc is a very wealthy man. He took a mortgage on the show. He won't lose anything."

I sat down and thought this over. Then I said: "And you haven't seen Stillwell since last spring?"

"No. I can't imagine what he would be doing here on the lot. Of course I read all about his embezzlement of State funds. I suppose that's how he meant to loan me the money—if he really meant to."

"One more question. When you went out with Stillwell you used the name of Carter. Why?"

"It was my mother's maiden name. She divorced Dad, and I lived with her till she died. Before I came with the carnival, I always used her name."

I got up.

"Don't go just yet. I want to know about this thing. How was Stillwell killed?"

"Can't tell you. He's still where Joe Davis found him—in the grave of the buried-alive show. Somebody must have taken a lot of trouble to plant him there."

Mary shuddered. "Stillwell was a fat man. I can't imagine how he could have been dragged through that tunnel. It was built just big enough for Louie." She looked up quickly. "Where's Louie?"

"On sick list. He got the cramps. Mike closed the show, and whoever took care of Stillwell must have figured the grave was a good place to hide him. The show would be closed for the rest of the week. If Davis hadn't chanced to look down the pipe, and the lights hadn't been left on, the odds are the carnival would have moved away without anybody ever noticing Stillwell."

Mary shuddered again. I left her sitting there. Mike was in his office, seated glumly at his desk.

"I wondered what had become of you," he said. "You call the cops?"

"I won't until Kever, my boss, gets here. That'll probably be an hour or more. In the meantime, I hope you've got good guards on Stillwell."

"Oh, I have. But I don't like leaving him down there. It don't seem decent somehow."

"I don't think he minds. By the way, Mike, did you send a telegram about Stillwell being here?"

Mike looked up. "I did not! Are you serious?"

I fished the telegram out of my pocket and tossed it over to Mike. He read it.

"Ben, I'd like to get my hands on the guy who sent this! Somebody's trying to make trouble for Mary! She hardly knew Stillwell—only met him last spring. Doc Halliday introduced her. Ask him."

"I intend to. Can you call him in here?"

Mike got up, went over to the door, and yelled. An old carnie hobbled up to the trailer door. Mike barked his instructions, then went back to his desk. We waited ten minutes. Doc Halliday was perspiring as usual when he came in. He smiled at me and spoke apologetically to Mike.

"I was just cleaning the tip when Matt came running up," he explained. "Hope I didn't keep you long."

Mike said: "Ben wants to question you. He's from the Attorney General's office. It's about Stillwell. You've heard?"

Halliday gravely nodded. I shot a questioning look at Mike. He grunted.

"You can't keep a thing like that quiet on a carnival lot, Ben. Carnies are the closest-mouthed people in the world—to outsiders. But among themselves, they've got a grapevine that's faster than wireless. Even if you only think something, they know about it in five minutes."

Doc Halliday was smiling. "I guess that's the way it is, Mr. Corbett. We've even got our own language. It's like a secret lodge, only the bonds are tighter. I suppose it's because we're

always traveling among strangers who look down on us. Everybody is against us—we've got to stick together."

"Some of you seem to do pretty well," I said. "For example, yourself. Mary Hennesy just told me you put up seventy-five grand to save the show this spring."

Halliday looked stunned. He shot a glance at Mike. Mike looked sour.

"Well, if Mary's told you that, all right. Only the deal was to be kept quiet."

Halliday nodded in agreement. "I didn't want anybody to know I had money in the show. But I suppose Mary had to tell you where she got it, after Stillwell turned up murdered."

"Then you did loan her the money?"

"Sure."

"How well did you know Stillwell?"

Halliday grinned sheepishly. "We got acquainted when we knew a pair of sisters back in Capital City. Stillwell saw me with Mary one night and wanted an introduction. When he found out about her financial difficulties, he used it as a lead. Mary was so put out when she found out he was kidding, I finally took care of the deal myself."

"When did you see Stillwell last?"

"Couple of months ago. It sure surprised me when I learned he'd been murdered."

"That's all," I said. "See you around."

I left Mike's trailer and crossed the midway to the palmist tent. Reena sat outside.

"Your mother busy?"

Reena nodded. A boy and a girl stopped at the tent and asked about a palm reading. Reena talked to them, interspersing her conversation with a sentence of pure carnie.

"*Miazeet miaze biazack iazof thiaze whiazeel*," she said, and I moved away, translating the hurried message as: "Meet me back of the wheel."

In carnival vernacular, I guessed a "wheel" would be a ferris wheel. The Great Exposition Shows boasted a particularly large

one, located at the far end of the midway. I headed toward it, trying not to seem in too much of a hurry.

Back of the ferris wheel the lot broke off into a gully. A row of packing cases, used to pack parts of the wheel, no doubt, had been piled along the edge of the lot. I slipped around them when I was sure nobody was looking, convinced that Reena intended me to wait there. I hoped she wouldn't be long.

I was smoking my last cigarette when the carnival lights went out. Still no Reena. Well, she was probably playing it safe. I thought I had her figured pretty well. Her old man was in a jam, and she would give me some lowdown if I would promise not to make it tough for him. It was the first break I'd had tonight.

Ten minutes after the lights went out, I heard somebody coming. I got up and moved toward the direction of the sound.

"Reena, here I am! I—"

I didn't see it come. When I opened my eyes again I didn't see anything either. It was black as pitch. I tried to separate my hands so I could force myself upwards, but I couldn't make it. I was lying on them, and at first I thought this had made them numb. Then I tumbled. My hands were tied.

My ankles were tied, too. I bent my knees, and something kept me from raising them very high. I tried to turn, but I was wedged into such a narrow place that this was impossible. I called out, not very loudly at first, then desperately. No answer.

I tried to take it easy. There was no use getting excited. The thing to do was to think matters over carefully. There was no real cause for alarm, even though . . .

It did seem cold. Clammy. My hands were on some kind of planking, but there was the smell of earth. There was another odor, too. I couldn't quite place it. I began to experiment, twisting myself as much as possible, feeling out the wedging walls on either side of me. It was a wall on one side, an earthen wall. The other side was soft, pliable.

I pressed harder against that soft side, kicked. Then I stopped kicking. I knew the truth. I was kicking a dead body. Still-

well's. I was sharing his grave with him. He wouldn't mind—he was dead. But I was alive!

If it had been possible, I'd have kicked myself. What a dope I'd turned out to be, walking right into Reena's trap! Of course Reena hadn't figured out the trap—she'd been used to lure me into it. The bright boy who had thought up all this had figured shrewdly. I thought I knew his name. Mike Morrow.

Alone on the carnival lot, Mike was the only one who knew I could understand any carnie. Reena had talked to me in carnie, slowly, I remembered now, like a foreign language teacher with a novice pupil. Mike had told her what to say. And only Mike could have wedged me in this grave, for the guard at the tunnel entrance was Mike's guard.

A guard had been stationed inside the tent. He, too, was gone now. Or, if he was still there, he was paying no attention to my calls. A thought occurred to me. The six-inch pipe had probably been stopped up. Rags stuffed into it would silence all sound. The other outlet, the tunnel's entrance . . .

Well, I was still getting air. I tried to remember—did I imagine now that there had been more air? Cold, clammy sweat ran down my temples. It would be so easy to shovel dirt into that tunnel entrance. Suffocation would come in a matter of minutes.

Keever—where the devil was Keever? He should be here by now. But anything could have happened. He might have had a flat tire, a burned-out bearing. If only I'd rung in the local cops in the first place! It just went to show how far I was capable of going for dear old Keever.

Nuts! If I ever got out of this, what I wouldn't tell Keever! I'd let him know once and for all that I was through being an underpaid stooge for a stuffed shirt like him. The rat!

"Keever, Keever!" I shouted. "For crying out loud, get me out of here!"

It was Keever's face peering down at me through the six-inch pipe. Suddenly I'd seen it there, dimly lighted, but still too real to be an illusion. I kept on shouting hysterically.

"Take it easy, Ben," said Keever. "I'll have you out of there in a minute. What in the world are you doing down there?"

I actually started to answer that one, then stopped short. Something came falling down the pipe, landed squarely on my nose.

"You louse!" I bellowed. "You clumsy clown! Would you mind being a little bit more careful? What did you drop down here anyway?"

"So sorry," said Keever. "It was my penknife. But I closed it. I had to cut away some of the rags stuffed down the pipe. Would you mind getting the knife for me as you come out?"

"With what? My hands are tied and so are my feet! Are you going to let me stay down here all night?"

Keever didn't answer. His face disappeared. It was replaced by another. I said scathingly: "Well, Mike, you really show a guy around. Thanks for a worm's-eye view of your show!"

"Ben, I'm really sorry. Believe me, I can't imagine how this happened!"

"Maybe I can refresh your memory when I get out of here!"

Getting out was no fun. I was dragged out past Stillwell's body, then through about fifteen feet of tunnel. By the time I reached the end I was scratched and bleeding. Keever himself was there to cut me loose, and this time he had a jackknife. I said nothing until I'd climbed out. Then it hurt me to say it.

"Well, thanks, Keever. This is one I owe you."

Keever laughed a little testily. "Strikes me, Ben, that you need a guardian! Are you sure you can look out for yourself? You might fall back into that grave!"

I let it go. For the next half hour I was very busy. Believe it or not, I went back into that grave. When I came out again I had Stillwell. As I pulled his big fat corpse out I kept thinking what a crowd we'd been in a grave built for Louie, who was as emaciated as a cadaver to begin with.

Keever's first question was: "Did you get my penknife?"

"Sure." I handed it over to him. I'd picked up something else, too, my .38. It had fallen out of my belt back there. When

I'd been planted it had been left with me, I guessed because it wasn't thought that I'd ever be able to use it again.

Stillwell had been shot with a small-caliber pistol right behind his ear. His pockets were empty, and there was definitely no clue to any hundred thousand dollars.

"Suppose you call everybody to your office," I told Mike. "I'd especially like to have a few words with a girl named Reena."

"Oh, yes," said Keever, "that's the girl whose father's missing. Well, we'll pick him up all right."

"I doubt it. But it might help if you gather in Mary Hennesy. I think maybe she can throw a little light on what goes on around here."

It took half an hour to round them all up outside Mike's trailer office. Everybody in the carnival lived in a trailer, so nobody was missing except Joe Davis and the lovely Reena.

"She's probably run away," said Mike. "Somebody put her up to steering Ben to the wheel, and afterwards she got scared. If she was here, she could tell us who it was."

"She can't get very far," said Mary Hennesy. "With her skin and the clothes she wears, anybody could spot her four blocks away."

It really amused me, hearing her talk about the clothes Reena wore. She herself was wearing the only clothes I'd ever seen her in: a wrap that left damn little to the imagination.

"Really, Miss Hennesy," said Keever, an eye on her knees, "it does seem incredible that Stillwell could have been murdered on your lot without some member of your troupe seeing him. Are you quite certain you did not see him after you left Capital City?"

"Quite. I've no idea how he could have turned up here."

"Nor me," said Mike. "I never even saw the guy."

There was a rap on the trailer door. I went over and opened it. It was Doc Halliday.

"I want to talk to Mike a minute," he said.

"Anything you have to say to Mr. Morrow," said Keever, "you can say in front of us."

Halliday shrugged and came into the trailer.

"All I want to do is what's right," he told Keever. "In my business I've got to stay on the side of the law. *Miazike, lazi'm tiazalkiazin'. lazi'm tiazakiazin' niazoz riazap fiazor niazobia-zody.*"

Keever was on his feet.

"What did he say? I demand to know what the man said!"

"He's going to talk," I volunteered casually. "He says he's taking no rap for nobody."

Keever looked incredulous. "How could you know that? You don't know any foreign languages. What kind of language was that man speaking?"

"Carnie, or *ciazarnie*, if you choose. It's a carnival code these people use among themselves. Maybe someday I'll give you six easy lessons in it."

Keever lifted his brows at the idea of my teaching him anything. He faced Halliday.

"All right, I'm the man to talk to if you want to talk."

"It's not much. It's just that I never put up the seventy-five thousand to save this show. Mike asked me to say I did, so I did. But I didn't, and I don't feel like lying about it when there's a murder involved."

Keever whirled on Mike.

"Then who did put up the money? Tell me the truth. It came from Stillwell, didn't it?"

"No," Mike answered coolly. "I put up the money myself."

"Why, Mike!" Mary Hennesy was looking at him wide-eyed. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Mike lowered his eyes. "I've had a crush on you for a long time, Mary. I didn't want you to feel you were under any obligation to me."

"That's awfully sweet of you, Mike. And all along I thought it was Doc Halliday who had saved the show!"

"Yes," I cut in, "he really is a sweet guy! If he had that much dough to put up, he had to get it from Stillwell. Then he bumped Stillwell. He'd have taken care of me, too, only he

didn't have time. Tell me, Mike, why did you want to knock me off? I hadn't found out anything."

"Ben, you're all wet. What makes you think I stuffed you into that grave?"

"Those were your guards, weren't they?"

"Sure. But they're also guys who do a hard day's work. When the show closed and the crowd left, I figured nobody would bother Stillwell, so I called 'em off. I didn't see you around, so I thought it wasn't too important."

"Very convenient. With the guards off duty, nobody could interfere when you dragged me into that tunnel."

Mike started to answer that, then his lips tightened.

"It looks," said Keever severely, "as though you'll have to account for that seventy-five thousand dollars."

"Maybe we can break this without asking him the sixty-four-dollar question," I said. "Mike, call in that gypsy fortune teller."

Mike went to the door and called. The gypsy woman came in, barely squeezing through the trailer door. She stared stolidly at us.

"Mrs. Davis," I said, "how long have you been with this carnival?"

"Just this season, mister."

"Did you ever know any of these people before that?"

The woman nodded at Mike. "Only him. He got me to come with the show."

I faced Halliday. "That right—nobody in the show knew this woman before?"

"I never did," said Halliday. "Come to think of it, nobody else ever heard of her or her family either."

"That's what I thought." I faced Keever. "You can stop looking for Joe Davis. He's dead. He's Stillwell. He came into the carnival under a black wig and a lot of dark skin dye. He posed as this woman's husband and father of her daughter. When my trail got too hot, he was liquidated." I spun on Mrs. Davis. "That's right, isn't it?"

She blinked her eyes but that was all. Finally I told Kever, "Get everybody else out of here, and maybe she'll talk."

Mike laughed loudly. "You're barking up the wrong tree, Ben, if you think she'll ever talk. Carnies don't squeal on each other."

I laughed right back at him. "Oh, I think she will. She'll talk when she finds out her little Reena has been murdered! She'll——"

That was all I could say. The palmist swung her huge bulk. "You killed her! You killed my Reena! I kill you!"

She would have, too, if she hadn't fallen over Kever trying to reach her destination. Her destination was Mary Hennesy. The blonde darted for the door. She almost beat me there, but not quite. The first time I grabbed, I got the wrap, but the second time there was nothing to pull off. The lady wriggled, kicked, and scratched until it became disgusting. I clipped her one on the button just to teach her manners, and then it was all over.

Kever stared pop-eyed from the floor.

"What's the matter?" I demanded. "Didn't you ever see a murderess before?"

Kever got up and seemed more interested in picking up the wrap than a confession. However, he got both.

First, about that telegram: Mary Hennesy sent it to me herself. She had wangled all of Stillwell's dough and wanted to put the heat on him. The fool had let himself be painted up with skin dye and disguised in a wig just to be near her. Mary had thought up the idea, making a deal with Mrs. Davis and sending her to Mike for a job. Even Mike was fooled, for he'd never known the woman or her daughter before.

Mary knew Stillwell would want to take it on the lam as soon as he spotted an investigator on the job, and, as a former state treasurer, a few doors from the A.G.'s office, he'd be sure to spot one, for he knew them all.

Mary figured she could give him car fare and kiss him

good-bye forever. But Stillwell turned out to be a tougher problem. He told Mary he wasn't going to travel alone, that if she wouldn't go with him, he'd go to the cops and tell all. Mary's response to that was a little bullet behind his ear, the firing of which was easily muffled in the carnival din.

Louie's cramps in the buried-alive grave gave her an opportunity to hide the body. With the show closed, Stillwell's body could be crammed in the grave with the odds against anybody finding the corpse. That was poor old Louie's chore. Desperate for his job, he readily helped carry Stillwell around the back way to the tent and the tunnel entrance. His experience wriggling in and out of his grave made it possible for him to stuff even Stillwell's bulk inside.

He was equally successful stowing me in there after he'd sapped me back of the wheel. Reena's mamma had overheard her making a date with me and tipped off Mary. Louie took care of me while Mary got Reena into her trailer and bound and gagged her. That's where we found her. Mary really meant only to hold the girl until her mother could handle her. Unfortunately for Mary, Ma Davis was insufficiently trustful.

Reena's date with me was on the level, because after she'd stumbled onto Stillwell's body she decided to tell me she had lied about her father finding the body because she had been afraid. She wanted to tell me that Stillwell had posed as her father and that Mary was paying her mother for keeping up the pretense.

"Poor Louie," moaned Doc Halliday at breakfast that morning. "I hope you won't be too hard on him."

"That's right," chimed in Mike. "He hardly has all of his buttons, letting Mary play him for a sucker like that."

"How you guys talk! Mary made marks of both of you! Halliday, she got Mike to talk you into fronting for that loan. Then, when you bowed out, Mike was ready to dig his own grave by telling us it was his money in the show. And you call these country yokels marks!"

Mike reddened. "You saw yourself what that girl's got."

Of course Keever couldn't let me off without a dig.

"Do you want to ride back with me to Capital City, or do you think you can drive back yourself without getting buried alive?"

I said: "I think I'll stay over a day or two. There's one loose end I want to take care of."

Keever said he thought everything was all taken care of, but I spent the rest of the week in Millerstown. That girl, Reena—wow!

Wish You Were Dead

Ever tell your wife in a fit of anger that you wished she were dead? If not, then perhaps you have at least thought it, though only momentarily. Dave Stafford did the former, and the next morning photographic evidence proved that he had killed her, while his conscience said otherwise. That is the situation contrived by C. William Harrison in his fast-moving crime story. And the ultimate solution, made possible by an incomplete memory of a dream in a dress, is no less surprising.

DAVE STAFFORD got home late that night. As he got off the bus unsteadily at the end of the line, two blocks from home, the driver said, "You think you can make it, Mr. Stafford?"

"Sure I can." Dave concentrated on getting off the bus without stumbling, thinking that it would be all over the neighborhood by morning that Dave Stafford, the hard-hitting political writer on the *Journal* and a reasonably respectable citizen, had got himself stewed. Trust a bus driver on the owl shift to pick up and spread gossip.

"I'm okay, Jack. I'm hunky-dory—just had a couple beers."

The driver grinned and winked. "A couple of beers to chase down a pint or so of Scotch. You're going to have a head on you tomorrow, Mr. Stafford."

That was, Dave recalled, what Phil Colby had said. "You're drinking yourself into a large headache, chum." But at the time that hadn't mattered. All Dave had wanted was to show Clair that he was his own man, that because she was his wife gave her no right to try to lead him around by the nose. Painting

the kitchen walls did not fit with his plans for his vacation that was soon to come, and that was what they had argued about. It seemed small and inconsequential now. The kitchen *did* need a new coat of paint.

He had ended up at the Press Club to finish drinking down his temper, and Phil Colby, who covered the courthouse for the *Journal*, had come to his table.

"Dave, you look like a cloud hunting a place to rain."

"I feel that way."

Phil grinned. "Me, too, when I've had a run-in with the little lady. That how it is?"

Dave nodded. Phil Colby was a pleasant sort, and it was good for a man to have someone to tell his troubles to. They had had drinks, and Dave had talked, while Phil listened sympathetically. Later Phil had excused himself and left, and Dave had finished the evening alone.

His head was beginning to ache now and he was feeling sick at the stomach when he turned up the flagstone walk toward the frame-and-stucco cottage. The lights were out in the house, but that was how he expected them to be. All this was following the old familiar pattern of their quarrels. Clair would spend the night locked up in the guest room, and Dave would sleep alone. Tomorrow she would say nothing about what had happened, and after a while Dave would batter down his pride and apologize.

He remembered Phil Colby's amused laugh as he fumbled his key into the lock.

"So you told her you wished she was dead! Funny, but when I'm sore I tell my wife the same thing. It's beginning to sound trite, Dave. But none of us ever really mean that."

He got the door open, and closed it quietly behind him. He pondered a moment, and then pressed the wall button. But the lights didn't come on. That unreasoning anger came surging up through him again. Clair must have pulled the master switch, just to spite him.

He raised his voice through the darkness. "Clair!"

He got no answer. The place was dark and silent, and somehow the old homey atmosphere was gone. It was almost as if he were alone in a house he had never before been in. He had a sudden stab of fear that Clair had left him—then he threw that off. He was letting whiskey get the better of his imagination. Clair, he told himself, was no quitter.

But he knew he could get no sleep until he had assured himself that she was here.

He started toward the guest room, but at his first step his foot struck something on the floor. He stooped automatically and picked it up. It was round and hard and oddly damp to his touch. He groped both hands along the object, and when he felt the fluted knob on the end he knew it was the fireplace poker.

Some small and metallic sound clicked in the room, but he hardly feared that.

He turned through the darkness to the fireplace and, slipping the poker into its holder, felt strangely relieved. Clair might throw things to wear out her temper, but if she had left him, pride and habit would not let her leave the house in disorder. So she was spending the night in the guest room as she had always done after their quarrels. The best thing, Dave told himself discreetly, was not to awaken her. He groped his way into the bedroom, rolled under a blanket, and fell instantly asleep.

A bell rang. Dave reached to the night stand, his eyes clamped tight against the ache pulsing in his temples. He picked up the phone, said, "Hello—go 'way," and hung up the receiver.

But it was the doorbell, not the phone, ringing. He sat up in bed and tried to knuckle the sleep out of his eyes. It was, he saw by the clock on the night stand, nearly nine o'clock in the morning. The harsh jangling of the bell hurt his ears. He wished it would stop ringing. Why hadn't Clair answered it?

He groped around with his feet for his shoes, but he couldn't

find them. Mallet-swinging demons were at work in his temples, and there was a sour, cottony taste to his mouth. He wondered if he should go to the bathroom or answer the door. He wondered why Clair didn't answer the bell. He had never before known her to carry a quarrel into the second day.

He suddenly remembered and felt guilty over the bitter way he had lashed out at Clair at the dinner table last night.

"Clair, we're just no good for each other. If anything ever happened to you, I couldn't care much."

If anything ever happened to Clair, it would be like losing everything worth while in his world. Dave knew that. Why does a man say such things? He never means them. He lets some trivial difference of opinion flare into something bitter and hating and unreasoning. He says things he never means, and he is sorry later. Sorry as hell, but he can't take back what he has said.

The bell rang again, insistently.

Dave pushed to his feet, and made his way unsteadily into the living room. Sunlight slanting through the venetian blinds on the east windows hurt his eyes. He went to the door, opened it.

"Well, well," he said, "the pony express!"

The postman was a small, prim man. He said, "Mr. David Stafford? A special delivery for you."

"Through rain and blizzard goeth the mail!" But Dave didn't feel funny. His head ached, and he was sick, and he was worried about Clair. He wished he could hear the small busy sounds she made working in the kitchen. Maybe she wasn't feeling well.

He took the large manila envelope, and reached for the pencil and postal receipt pad. He saw the expression change on the postman's face, tightening up his eyes and mouth.

"Did you hurt yourself, sir?"

Dave looked down, quickly. Blood was dry and reddish-brown on the palms of his hands. He looked at it with a strong feeling of surprise and shock. He didn't remember hurting him-

self the night before. He didn't remember anything happening that could have put blood on his hands.

"Did you cut yourself, Mr. Stafford?"

"I just killed a chicken." It didn't seem like a smart thing to say. It sounded hollow, foolish. But he couldn't think of anything else.

The postman nodded, but he still stared. Dave wondered if the other realized that the blood was already dry. Crazy thing to have said.

Then he realized the postman was saying something about dry blood.

He grunted. "That's how we raise all our chickens—with quick-drying blood. It's strictly a Stafford development, increases the calorie content in our feathered friends."

He closed the door, leaned back against it, trembling.

He was afraid. He didn't know what he was afraid of, and yet suddenly there were many things. Little things that had meant nothing to him before. Little things that were mushrooming into big things now.

In all their other quarrels, Clair had not tried to spite him by pulling the house's master switch. But last night the wall buttons had been dead; there had been no lights.

The house had seemed queerly, silently empty. He had called out to her once, but she hadn't answered.

"Clair!"

His cry ran off through the house and hid itself in silence.

He remembered stumbling against something in the darkness last night, and picking it up, and it had been the fireplace poker—strangely wet to his touch.

Dave's glance jerked to the poker, and the same dry red-brown stain was on the heavy iron rod that was on his hands. Blood!

His fear became something real, striking deep into his mind, and he could no longer trust his memory. He had been drunk last night, and maybe his brain was playing tricks on him. Maybe he had not stumbled against the poker just after com-

ing into the house after all! Maybe he'd gone directly to bed, still bitter and angry with Clair—with his memory of the blood-wet poker coming from something which had happened later in the night. The fear whipped up in him. He had been a police reporter in his younger days, and he had heard of men committing murder without ever remembering it.

"Clair!"

He ran to the guest room. The bed had been used the night before, but the room was empty. He ran to the bathroom and kitchen, and searched the basement, but he couldn't find her. Clair was gone. Something had happened during the night, and Clair was gone!

He went back to the living room and sat down, trembling and cold with sweat.

You're acting like a damn fool, Dave, he told himself. *Maybe she was just sore, and left to spend the night with some friend.*

He searched the house again, this time forcing himself to keep a grip on his panic. None of their luggage was gone. As near as he remembered, he could account for all of her dresses. Fear began piling up in him again. She would have taken a dress or two with her if she had gone to spend the night with a friend.

Some violence must have happened last night. He searched for signs of it, and found but little—the poker and a small, dry bloodstain on the living-room rug, not far from the front door. And the blood on his hands.

Panic began to drum maddeningly in his temples. It didn't seem possible that he could have done murder without remembering it. It seemed even less possible that he could have carried his wife's body out into the night for disposal without remembering it.

Standing there, he became conscious of the envelope the postman had brought, still in his hand. He opened it automatically, pulled out the enlarged photograph that was inside.

It was a picture of murder—of Dave Stafford standing just

inside the door with a poker in his hand. The body of a woman was on the floor not far in front of him, arms outstretched, face down on the rug. He could see only a small part of her face, but memory filled in the familiar details that were not visible in the photograph.

"Clair!" he whispered. "Oh, Clair!"

They had been married in July five years ago, and they had honeymooned at a lakeside cottage, far up in Michigan. There had been a soft breeze combing the high tops of the pines, and there had been music in the wavelets breaking on the beach, and much later that night Clair had said, "I'm yours, darling, and you're mine, forever," and he had teased her.

"Forever is a long time, honey."

"Not long enough. Till death do us part."

"I kill all my wives when I'm tired of them. I'm a Bluebeard!"

"You're a darling!"

"You're trying to spoil me. You belong to the corset-and-bustle age. I'm immune to that kind of charm."

"You think so? You think so, darling? Come here——"

Her hair, on the pillow, caught and held some of the moonlight slanting in through the window, and there was a faint, knowing smile on her lips. . . .

The police came while Dave stood there, staring at the photograph. The doorbell jangled, and Dave moved unthinkingly across the room. He opened the door, and there was Sergeant Mulhavy.

"Well, well, the crusading newsman in person!"

He was a short, a square man, this sergeant of detectives, and once he had worn a lieutenant's badge. Black was the key to the man. His suit and his eyes and hair were that color, and powder over a fresh shave gave his jaw a faint blue-black tinge. There was, Dave had long felt, black in the man's soul. But in his way, Mike Mulhavy was a good cop. Tough and sometimes ruthless in his methods, but a good cop.

Dave said, "Ah, the man with the rubber hose!"

"In the flesh!" Mulhavy grinned. But his eyes didn't grin. He pointed to the photograph Dave had tried to slip under his coat. "We got one in the morning mail, too!" he said.

"You always were a sucker for a gag," Dave said, but his voice was thin and tight.

"That's what I came over to talk about," Mulhavy answered dryly. He put his hand on Dave's chest, and moved slowly forward. He came into the room and closed the door behind him. He locked the door.

"Mind if I look around?"

"Help yourself, Mike." Dave was trying to keep cool, but blood was pounding his brain into a turmoil. Why had that picture been mailed to him and to police headquarters? Who had taken it? When? Why were they doing this to him? Where was Clair?

"You lead the way," Mulhavy said.

Dave shrugged, turned. He should have known what the detective would do. He felt his arms jerked behind his back, heard the snap of handcuffs locking his wrists together.

He flared over his shoulder, "What is this—a pinch?"

Mulhavy laughed mirthlessly. "Don't be coy, Stafford. I never take chances with killers."

"I'm not a killer."

"That," Mulhavy said coolly, "remains to be seen."

They went through the house from room to room, the detective's hard black eyes taking in every detail. Mulhavy paused in the kitchen, his glance searching the rear yard. But the grass out there had not been disturbed. He spun suddenly to bark a harsh question at Stafford.

"Where did you hide it?"

"What?"

"The body. Don't try to play innocent, Stafford! Where did you hide your wife's body?"

"I didn't—"

"What do you take me for, Stafford—a damn fool? You mur-

dered your wife last night, and hid her body. I want to know where."

"I'm trying to tell you——"

Mulhavy slashed the back of his hand across Dave's mouth. He could be, when he wanted to be, brutally patient.

"All right, Stafford," he said softly. "You go on with your little game. I'll play mine. And when I'm through I'll have you wrapped up and ready for the chair!"

They went into the basement, and Mulhavy turned to a door. "Is this your darkroom?"

Dave nodded.

Mulhavy's mouth was a tight trap that squeezed out cold amusement. "I heard you were an amateur photographer. So am I, but you didn't know that, did you? Let's look around in here, Stafford."

He switched on a light in the darkroom. It was a small, compact room where Dave had spent many idle moments over his trays and tanks. Everything was neat and in order, all the equipment in its proper place.

Mulhavy ran his finger into the film-developing tank, and it came out wet. He gave Dave a meaning look.

"You should have dried this out better last night."

"I haven't developed a negative in a month."

Mulhavy shrugged, turned to the enlarger. He pulled out the holder that held the negative while an enlargement was being made. He separated the two metal plates, and pulled out the negative that had been in the enlarger. He held the rectangle of celluloid up to the light, and from where Dave stood he could see the image on the negative. It was the film from which the murder picture had been made.

Mulhavy's glance was bleak, sardonic. "Now tell me you haven't seen this negative before," he jeered.

It was as if a web of wire had suddenly wrapped around Dave Stafford. It tightened his breathing, it started his heart slugging the walls of his chest.

"I never saw that film until you took it out of the enlarger. You've got to believe me, Mulhavy! Someone is framing me, and I don't know why!"

"They all say that, Stafford."

"But it's true! I loved my wife! We had our spats, but I loved her. I couldn't have killed Clair!"

"You ought to be able to do better than that, Stafford. You're a newspaperman, and you sound like a punk."

He shoved Dave out of the darkroom, switched off the lights. He pushed Dave upstairs, and into a living-room chair. He bent forward, and his voice came bleak, brittle.

"I'm going to burn you, Stafford! Get that under your bonnet, and keep it there. I'm going to wrap you in a sack, and deliver you to the death house for this murder."

He turned to the flood lamp and reflector he had brought up from the darkroom. He plugged in the cord and threw the hot white glare of light into Dave's eyes.

"Now talk!"

The glare of light hurt Dave's eyes. It burned. He tried to look away, but Mulhavy slapped his face around. Now the detective was slipping into his old way of working. He was shrewd and he was brutal. He was a rubber-hose cop who beat confessions out of his suspects. It was this method of working that had cost him his lieutenant's badge, and he blamed Dave's newspaper writings for his demotion.

"You used your paper to get me busted, and I couldn't fight back. Now I've got you against the wall, Stafford. I've got my evidence, and I'll have your confession. Where did you hide your wife's body?"

"I didn't kill her." It was all Dave could say. His mouth hurt and his eyes hurt and his head hurt. He was sick, and blood was between his teeth. Knots of ache were in his body where the detective's fist had struck. But those blows kept coming. And those harsh, probing words kept coming.

"Don't give me that guff about picking up that poker just to

put it back where it belonged. You were drunk, but not too drunk. You murdered your wife, and I'll burn you for it. You quarreled with her last night."

"How'd you know that?"

"Everyone on the force knows it. Phil Colby came in last night and told about meeting you at the Press Club last night. He thought it was a joke. But it wasn't a joke. You told him you'd quarreled with your wife, that you told her you wished she was dead. Phil thought it was funny. But it wasn't funny for your wife. It won't be funny for you."

"I didn't kill her. I'm trying to tell you——"

"Then how did you get all that blood on your hands?"

"From the poker, I told you. I picked it up. . . ."

"And how did the blood get on the poker?"

"I don't know."

"If you didn't take that photograph, who did?"

"I wish I knew!" Dave ran the tip of his dry tongue across dry lips. He was sick and beaten, but he couldn't get Clair out of his mind.

We celebrated our first anniversary by returning to the lakeside cottage where we'd honeymooned, but there was a fire, and the cottage burned down, and Clair cried. . . .

"How long did it take you to develop and print that negative?"

"I told you I didn't take that picture."

"Someone used your darkroom last night?"

"Anyone could have. I'd been drinking. I passed out when I hit the bed."

"I love you, darling. Dave, sometimes I love you so much it hurts."

Mulhavy punched the tips of his stiff fingers into Dave's stomach. "I want the truth."

"I gave you the truth." He was sick. He wondered how long he had been taking Mulhavy's beating. An hour? A year? It seemed that long, because all he could do was sit there and take it. Take those stabbing blows that hurt but left no marks,

take the hot glare of the floodlight trained against his eyes, take Mulhavy's persistent, maddening words.

"You murdered your wife, and I'll prove it, Stafford."

"No!"

"You came home last night and murdered your wife with that fireplace poker. You set your camera up and took that picture by using the delayed-action mechanism. You thought you were smart by framing yourself. You thought you were being very smart! You made the enlargements in your darkroom, and mailed headquarters a print for what you thought was a good reason. You slipped up on just one thing—no outside murderer would have sent a picture both to you and to us.

"Most killers try to run away from murder, but your plan was to wallow in it. You wanted all the evidence so clearly against you and so easy for us to find that we'd believe you had been framed. No man with your intelligence would do murder without trying to escape or alibi himself. That's what you wanted us to think. Maybe the rest of the force will think that, but not Mike Mulhavy! Don't you pass out on me, Stafford; keep your head up, damn you. I want you to get this straight. I'll find where you hid your wife's body. No matter how long it takes, I'll pin this murder on you."

That was all Dave Stafford heard. . . .

His head ached, and even his teeth ached, and the dry taste of blood was in his mouth. Mulhavy was gone, but that gave Dave no feeling of surprise or hope. It was Mulhavy's way of working, to throw the fear of God into a man, and then leave the suspect on his own. If the suspect tried to leave town, he would be damning himself with new evidence.

Mulhavy was efficient, and he was cruel. Once he set out to pin a crime on a man he felt certain was guilty, the detective would let nothing stop him. He was tireless, inexorable. And there were rumors around headquarters that Mulhavy had more than once manufactured the evidence necessary to con-

vict a killer. Yet the man was undeniably honest, a cop who could not be bought.

But Mulhavy was human, and in that Dave Stafford knew a cold, tightening fear. The man was human enough to have his prejudices, even if he would never admit it. In that was the core of Dave's danger. Mulhavy hated him because Dave had once used his newspaper campaign to force the detective to tone down his rubber-hose method of working. So he would use every trick and skill to pin this murder on Stafford. With Mulhavy, it would be an opportunity to prove once and for all that when it came to convicting a killer, the means justified the end.

Dave got out of his chair, went into the bathroom, and washed the dry blood out of his mouth. He examined himself in the mirror, but the beating Mulhavy had given him had left no marks. Mulhavy was too smart for that.

Dave turned back into the living room, a man lost in his own worry and fear. It seemed unbelievable that his wife—his Clair—could be dead.

Yesterday morning I kissed her before leaving for work. I said, "I must have been using someone else's luck when I got you. You're tops, honey." And last night we quarreled.

He picked up the photograph, and stared at its image of murder. Yes, it was Clair. He knew that. The right arm of the woman in the picture was bare to the shoulder, and there, dark and distinct, was the strawberry birthmark. That alone was all the identification Dave Stafford needed.

He wanted to cry, but he couldn't cry. Everything inside him was a dry, barren hurt. He kept telling himself over and over again, "Drunk as I was, I couldn't have killed Clair without remembering it. Someone else did this. Someone murdered Clair, and framed me. I've got to think. I've got to find out who it was!"

He examined the envelope the photograph had been mailed in, but it told him nothing. It had been mailed special delivery from inside the city, and it bore only his printed name and

address. And the thought suddenly struck him, grim in its certainty, that if this case got far enough Mike Mulhavy would show proof that the envelope had been addressed with Dave's ink and pen. It would be, in Mulhavy's mind, further evidence that Dave had tried to frame himself for murder.

Some peculiarity in the photograph nagged Dave. He had more than the average amateur's skill with a camera and dark-room equipment, and yet he couldn't put his finger on any definite fault in this picture. The composition had been dictated by the grim purpose of the photograph—to draw Dave Stafford into a murder case. The focus was clean and sharp in the picture. Whoever had snapped the shutter, Dave decided, must have stood near the dining room, training his camera to pick up the entire front wall when Dave had entered the house last night.

"Yet the room was dark when I came in!" he said to himself. "I was drunk, but I remember that much!"

A photograph made in a room that was completely dark? A flash shot made without a visible spill of light?

Dave bent closer to the photograph, picking out details in the room's furnishings and balancing them against his experience behind a camera lens. The table vase in the picture was pink, but it didn't show up in the photograph as it normally should, a neutral gray. The vase appeared pure white. The seascape hanging over the radio showed water that had photographed black. The strawberry birthmark on Clair's shoulder showed dark and vivid against a skin that was unnaturally transparent in the picture. Yet the woman's fingernails, which normally would have matched the birthmark in color, appeared quite colorless.

Dave examined his own image, and that told him the rest of the story. He had shaved before leaving the house yesterday evening, yet a distinct dark beard had been brought out along the flat planes of his jaw. And then he had it.

Infra-red!

It was the key to everything Dave needed to know about

the picture. The murderer, the cameraman, whoever he was, had used a blackout bulb and film to get this damning photograph—he had used a film that was sensitive to the infra-red rays of light, a coated bulb that made no visible flare of light when it flashed out its infra-red rays to make a picture. Infra-red rays brought out the below-the-surface beard in a man's skin, recorded blues as solid black, bleached reds into white.

Excitement began kneading Dave's brain. He picked up the phone, dialed police headquarters, and asked for Mike Mulhavy.

"Who?"

"Mike Mulhavy, and hurry!"

Then fear came back into Dave Stafford, and he dropped the phone back into its cradle. Telling Mulhavy what he had discovered would do no good. Mulhavy claimed a working knowledge of photography, himself. If he had not already noticed that infra-red had been used to make the picture, he would not be long guessing it. And he would only claim Dave had used this method to build up a murder frame against himself.

The irony hurt and numbed Dave Stafford; he had solved one puzzle in this murder—a murder he wanted to solve mostly for Clair's sake—but he hadn't helped himself to remain free to finish the job. And he had no one to whom to turn for help.

The room with its memories of all the living it had given Dave and Clair began squeezing down on him. They had had their quiet, pleasant evenings here, they had laughed and sometimes they had danced to music from the radio—and Clair had died here.

He got his hat and went outside, locking the door carefully behind him, because that had always been his habit when Clair was not at home. He started down the walk, trying to force himself to think of who could have wanted Clair dead. She had no enemies that he knew of. Robbery could not have been the motive. His own enemies, then?

As a crusader, he had made his enemies—but none he could

consider capable of murder. Mike Mulhavy hated him, but it was the honest hatred of a cop who felt that justice had been injured when he had been forced to soften his method of working.

There was the bond broker who had been exposed as a crook in Dave's column. That man was still in prison, but could one of his relatives or friends be behind this murder? It seemed a hollow possibility.

There was George Maston, head of the city's Board of Public Works. Maston was a man with the ability of some politicians to get rich quickly and questionably. He campaigned, like many others of his kind, for the votes of the little man, and then used his elected position for his own petty benefit.

Dave had been fighting Maston's re-election, and had earned that man's hatred. Maston might use tricks and threats and political weight to batter down opposition, but murder was not in his line. As for others . . .

He was turning down the street toward the bus stop when he heard the voice.

"Hey, mister!"

He halted, turned. A small boy was running toward him, bright-eyed, tow-headed.

"Are you Mister Stafford, mister?"

The boy stopped running, grinned. "I got something for you that you lost. It's right here." He held out his hand. "It says on it there's a reward if you lose it and get it back."

It was a lipstick, and scratched in its plastic case were the words: "Return to D. Stafford, 67 Winthrop Place. Reward."

"It says you'll pay a reward," the boy said eagerly.

Dave pulled the cap off; the wax stick inside was not red, but a deep brown. It was part of a make-up kit used in taking infra-red portraits to give the lips a natural color. It was what had been used to make the birthmark on Clair's shoulder stand out in the photograph, so identification of the body would be unmistakable.

"You weren't kidding about the reward, were you, mister?"

Dave said grimly, "I wasn't kidding." But he had never bought this make-up stick, had never seen it before. He handed the boy a dollar.

"Where did you find this, sonny?"

"In the alley behind your house. Only I didn't find it exactly. I was playing there with Ronny and Judy, and a man came along and found it. He gave it to me and said I could have the money if I brought it to you." The boy suddenly looked alarmed. "Only I wasn't supposed to tell you that."

"What?"

The boy's grip tightened on the dollar. "The man told me not to tell you about him. He said you might not give me the reward. You ain't going to take it back, mister?"

"I'm not going to take it back, sonny. What did the man look like?"

"He was kinda tall."

"How tall?"

"About as big as you, I think. And he was wearing a blue suit, I think, or maybe it was black."

Mulhavy! The thought stabbed thin and cold into Dave's mind. This was to have been part of the evidence Mulhavy was building up against Dave!

"And I think he was smoking a pipe."

Mulhavy was strictly a pipe man, Dave remembered.

The morning sun was climbing high, and heat came up from the sidewalk and pressed against Dave Stafford. The bus let Dave out on Monument Circle; and across the street, in the center of the Circle, was the towering gray memorial that had been erected in honor of Indiana's Civil War dead. The water that spilled into the monument's twin pools was blue-green and clean. It looked cool, but the day was hot. A sailor, home on furlough, was leaning against a parapet, talking to a girl who reminded Dave, strangely and with a stab of bitter pain, of Clair. Neither the sailor nor the girl saw Dave approach.

The sailor said, "A guy has a lot of time to think when he's out there."

"A girl waiting at home thinks a lot too, Bill."

"I was thinking—that is, a guy gets to thinking that if he had someone at home, a wife—that if you'd marry me—"

The girl said, "I would. . . . I will—Bill, yes!"

Dave moved past them, and on. They were in their world of life and hope, and he was in his world of anxiety and loss—of murder that had no reason or answer.

He walked slowly. He looked behind him, thinking it would be Mike Mulhavy's way to have him tailed. But he could see no one following him. He left the Circle, turned up Penn Street, and then into the camera store. This was the largest and most complete dealer in photographic supplies in the city. Ken Stratton, who managed the store, moved up the counter.

"Hello, Mr. Stafford."

He was a large man, this Stratton, with a strange and friendly glint of secret amusement in his round eyes. Dave took the make-up stick from his pocket, laid it on the counter.

"Did you ever see anything like that before, Ken?"

The man looked down at the brown lipstick. He raised his glance again. Except for that suggestion of mirth in his eyes, Stratton's face was grave. Dave sensed rather than saw it, and it worried him without reason. It was as though the man behind the counter knew something—almost as if he had expected Dave to come here with this question.

Stratton nodded. "Why, sure, Mr. Stafford. It's part of an infra-red make-up kit. We're the only store in town selling it. You ought to know that."

Surprise reached into Dave Stafford. "I?"

"Sure."

It was more than Dave could understand. But then he had frequented this place, like all other amateurs, and perhaps the store manager thought Dave had noticed his stock of infra-red supplies.

Dave said, "Look, this is important to me. I've got to know who bought this make-up stick."

"Don't you know?"

"Damn it, Ken, stop trying to kid me! How should I know?"

"I'm not kidding," Stratton said. "You bought that lipstick!"

A cold finger traced Dave's spine. "Now look—"

"It's got your name scratched on it," Stratton reminded him.

"I know that! But I didn't put it there. I never saw that stick before!"

"You came in a week ago and bought it from me," Stratton said firmly. "And you bought half a dozen blackout flash bulbs. We don't do much trade in that line, and I remember distinctly."

"You're crazy!"

"You said you were going to take some infra-red flash shots. Of your wife, I think. A joke on her or something. I'm not crazy, Mr. Stafford."

Dave stood staring at the man. He was cold inside, and he was scared. "Then I am," he said hoarsely. He was more afraid than he had ever been before in his life.

He went to the terminal, and stood there watching the buses load and pull out for distant cities. He didn't know how long he had been there, or how he had got there.

And being there meant nothing in particular to him. He had been walking, driven by the restless panic that was crowding his reasoning, and suddenly he was here in the terminal. Some subconscious urge to flee, perhaps. . . .

He put his mind on that question, and let it lead him on to other questions. Did his fear stem from guilt, from a murder he had done and could not remember committing?

He had said, hot with anger, "Clair, if anything happened to you I wouldn't care."

He hadn't meant that, not really. He had been working hard, and his temper had been frayed, and Clair had been angry with him, and he had been angry with her. She had always been more potent than he in an argument. He had said that

because he had been on the defensive and knew it. He had wanted only to hurt her.

But had what he told her become rooted in some dark corner of his mind to be released in an insensate, murderous fury while he was drunk? Could he have murdered her?

It was, he knew, psychologically possible. But such things happened only to *other* people, not to David Stafford. Yet there was the photograph Mike Mulhavy claimed Dave had taken. And the film-developing tank in his darkroom had been freshly used—the negative from which the picture was blown up had been in his enlarger. And the manager of the camera store claimed Dave had bought infra-red supplies that Dave could not remember either purchasing or using!

Dave thought, quick and frightened, *Maybe I am crazy!*

He turned, and it was as if some dark force made him single one man out of that roiling crowd—Mike Mulhavy. The detective was standing far across the terminal, and as Dave walked toward him, that cold, inexorable smile was on the man's mouth.

Mulhavy said, "What made you change your mind about leaving?"

Dave shook his head. "I wasn't going to leave."

A baffled anger was in the detective's stare and tone. "I've been watching you for five minutes, Stafford, ever since you got here. You came here to try to slip out of town, but you couldn't decide what bus to take. You came here because you're guilty of murdering your wife. You know it, and I know it. You didn't think we'd let you out of sight, did you?"

"I told you I didn't do it, Mulhavy."

"Where did you hide her body?"

"I didn't kill Clair, I tell you."

"You were planning to take a powder. That's why you came here. You were afraid, and it was in your face. You're not the first murderer I've seen crack."

Dave said harshly, "If you're so sure I'm guilty, why don't you take me in?"

Mulhavy smiled, mirthlessly patient. "Everything in its time, Stafford. When I drag you in, you're going to be wrapped up for the chair. Right now, you've got enough drag to be out again in no time. But, believe you me, I'm getting what I need against you."

"What?" Dave asked. "What have you got against me?"

Mulhavy shrugged.

"You haven't got a damn thing, and you know it!" Dave flared. "Until you know who took it, that photograph isn't evidence. Let me tell you something, Mulhavy. For a while, when I stood over there watching those buses pull out, I thought maybe I *had* murdered my wife. Everything that's happened almost pushed me off my rocker. I might have tried to get out of town without knowing exactly why, I was so mixed up for a while. But I didn't. You can thank yourself for that."

Mulhavy's eyes narrowed. "Me?"

"You!" Dave snapped. "You missed your bet there, Mulhavy. You tailed me too close. I saw you standing here, and it knocked me back to my senses. I'd forgotten about you and how you work. Now I know I couldn't have murdered Clair. I can't prove it, but I know it—because *you* know it."

"Someone—and I don't know who—framed me with that picture. But everything else against me is of your making. You think I took that picture. You tried to beat a confession out of me. And now you're trying to frame me with trumped-up evidence of your own."

Mulhavy spat.

"You were in that camera store before I got there. You told Ken Stratton to tell me I'd bought supplies for taking infra-red pictures. You were trying to scare me into making a break."

There was no expression, either admission or denial, in Mulhavy's hard face.

Dave dug the lipstick out of his pocket. "You even gave that kid this make-up stick for infra-red, just to get me into Stratton's store."

Mulhavy took the stick of lip coloring out of Dave's hand.

A surprise and puzzled expression flickered across his face like a shadow, then was gone.

"So I did that, did I?" he growled. He gave Dave a long, narrow stare. "You're either a fool or damn smart, Stafford. When I find out which, I'll have you all wrapped up for the chair. And don't try to leave town, chum. You couldn't get very far."

In the stockroom of his camera store, Ken Stratton was apologetic, and the glint of expectant mirth was no longer in his eyes.

He said, "I'm sorry as the devil, Mr. Stafford. It was Mike Mulhavy's idea. He said telling you that you bought that infra-red stuff was to be some sort of a joke. But after you left, I got to thinking it over."

"Murder's no joke," Dave told him.

Stratton's stare widened, startled. "Mur—" he choked.

Dave asked, "Who bought that infra-red outfit?"

But he couldn't break through the alarm and curiosity that gripped the store manager's mind. There was no patience left in Dave Stafford. He had been beaten by Mike Mulhavy's blows, and he had been beaten by his own doubts and fears. Now he was against a wall, and he was fighting back. He put the flat of his hand against Stratton's chest, pushed the man against a packing crate.

He said savagely, "Look, Ken, you can keep your curiosity until the noon papers hit the street. I asked you a question, and I want to know the answer. Who bought that infra-red stuff?"

Stratton's answer came without hesitation. "George Maston."

"What?" It shocked Dave, and he asked, "Are you sure?"

The store manager nodded.

"But Maston is a politician! He's a politician inside and out. It's his hobby and his business. I've studied him and his history, and I know him. He doesn't know shutter from infinity, when it comes to photography!"

"Maybe so," Stratton said, "but I've been reading your news

column, Mr. Stafford. You've been riding George Maston, and I remembered his name when he phoned here for that infra-red stuff."

Dave gripped the man's arm. "You mean he didn't come in after it?"

"Not in person. He phoned his order and had a girl pick it up."

"His secretary?"

"I wouldn't know. But she was a looker." Stratton made motions with his hands. "She paid me with Maston's check, in the exact amount. That was ten days ago, and the check went through. So it was George Maston, all right!"

"But who was the girl?" Dave asked savagely. "What did she look like—height, weight, coloring?"

"About five feet four, I imagine. I noticed her because I thought at the time she'd weigh about one-eighteen. A dark blonde—wore a blue dress—nice legs. I've never seen her before or since."

Dave groaned. From that description, the woman might have been, he knew, his own wife.

He asked wearily, "You told Mulhavy all this?"

Stratton nodded. "Sure. He asked if you'd bought any infra-red stuff, and I told him no."

Dave's thoughts narrowed down. "Mulhavy didn't buy that make-up lipstick I showed you?"

The store manager shook his head. "He didn't buy anything."

Then, Dave realized, someone else had planted that lip paste near his house where it would be found. Yet the description given by the boy who had brought the lipstick did not match with George Maston.

Dave turned slowly away.

The store manager caught his arm. "There's one thing I forgot to tell Mike Mulhavy. I just remembered it. When that woman opened her purse to get out Maston's check, I saw part of an address on her billfold. It was twenty-one hundred and

something on Central Avenue, I think. That help you any, Mr. Stafford?"

It was a nondescript neighborhood of frame houses and brick apartments. Dave tried the grocery and local restaurant, but he had no luck. He went to the corner drugstore, questioned a clerk.

He repeated the description Stratton had given him. "She answered an ad I put in the papers for a stenographer. I decided to give her the job, but I lost her name. I remember her address was somewhere around here."

The drug clerk frowned. "It sounds like she might be Mrs. Collings. Only she works in some defense plant, and she said once she wouldn't take another job until her husband came home from war." He suddenly snapped his fingers. "How about June Harvey?"

Dave rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "The name does sound familiar——"

The drug clerk said, "She's the only other one around here that answers your description. She lives in the Carmon Apartments—number thirty-two. I deliver cokes up there——"

The apartment was a walk-up, and Dave found number 32 halfway down a dimly lighted hall. He knocked on the door, and got no answer. He waited. A man who had been idling at the far end of the hall came out of the shadows at a slow walk.

Dave rapped on the door again. The man in the hall moved closer, short and heavy and strangely light on his feet. He drifted to a halt, watching Dave with small, deep-set eyes. There was a dent in his nose and scars around his eyes, and his right ear had been mutilated in some past battle.

"You looking for June?" He had a hoarse, whispery voice, a strangely hostile voice.

Dave nodded. A queer coldness was settling in the pit of his stomach.

"June ain't answering the door today," the man said. "I'll let you in."

Dave frowned. He didn't like the way this man kept watching him. There was something personal in it, a menace, a danger.

He said uncertainly, "I can come back later."

"June won't mind at all," the man whispered. He fitted a key into the door, twisted it. He pushed the door open. "She won't mind at all, mister. Go right on in."

It was, Dave thought, more of a threat than an invitation. He couldn't understand it, and yet it was there—cold and unmistakable. He hesitated, but only long enough to read the warning in the man's unblinking stare. The man wanted Dave to go inside. He was an ex-pug, and he could—and would—force Dave to go into the apartment if necessary.

"Thanks," Dave murmured. He moved through the doorway, two slow strides, and there he halted.

The body was lying at one side, on the floor, with one arm thrown over her face, and she was quite motionless. She was, Dave knew, dead.

The man behind him said, "There she is. You said you wanted to see June."

Dave said nothing. He didn't move. He stood there, staring at the body and noticing how much this woman looked like his Clair. The woman wore a white dress with a pink floral print that was a duplicate of one Clair had bought only a few days ago. Her hair was only slightly darker than Clair's, but there was a different cut to that portion of the face which Dave could see under the woman's still arm.

The man caught Dave's shoulder, jerked him around with sudden violence. He said harshly, "I warned you not to see June any more!"

And then he swung his fist.

Dave went down under that short, clubbing blow. His ribs hurt where the man's knuckles had landed, and he couldn't pull air into his lungs. But the man wouldn't let him stay down.

He jerked Dave to his feet, and said in a raw, hating voice, "I warned you to stop playing around with my girl!"

He was a man made mad by his bitterness and hatred. He released Dave, used his left fist again, and his right. Dave sagged and hit the floor. He rolled over, and forced himself to sit up. He was sick in his stomach, and he thought, *That man's going to kill me!*

He tried to say, "I've never even seen this woman before!" But there was no air in his lungs, not enough strength in his words to reach up to the man with the ring-scarred face.

He felt himself jerked to his feet again, shoved back against the wall. He struck out, blindly and instinctively, but he did not have the skill even to hit the other. He watched the man's fists coming up again, hard, white-knuckled knots that could bruise and hurt. Fists that could knock the life out of a man. The pug had the power in his meaty shoulders, he had the skill. The will to kill was in his small, hot eyes.

Dave veered to one side, scraping along the wall with his back. He dodged away from the wall and into the open, but he couldn't get away. He couldn't escape.

A blow caught him below the ear, halting his movement. Through the red haze that was in his vision, he saw the man crowd in close. The man's weight and his cruel strength bent Dave over the back of a chair, stretching the muscles of his stomach taut. He heard the man's low, gritting hatred in his ears.

"You killed my girl, and now I'm going to kill you!" His face was darkly flushed and his eyes were ruthless, and his fist was raised and cocked over Dave's stretched stomach muscles. "When I hit you, damn you, I'll bust your belly wide open!"

Another voice said, so low and distant in Dave's dazed brain that he was not certain he had heard it, "Don't do that!"

But the pug's cocked fist did not relax.

The voice was sharper this time. "Don't do it, I said! I'd hate to have to shoot you!"

The balled fist sank out of his vision and the pressure was released from Dave's straining back. He tried to straighten,

but he couldn't straighten. He slipped to the floor and sat there, staring dully at Mike Mulhavy at the door.

The detective came into the room, and a gun was in his hand. It was strange, Dave thought, that Mulhavy had given no more than a passing glance to the body of the woman on the floor. No surprise showed in Mulhavy's face. It was almost as if Mulhavy had known death was waiting inside this room.

Phil Colby came through the door behind Mulhavy. Because it was his job to handle news and photography at police headquarters, Colby had his camera with him. He saw Dave Stafford, and after his first flicker of surprise, he was strangely and coldly impersonal.

Mike Mulhavy said, "You all right, Stafford?"

Dave nodded. "I feel like I'd been hit by a tank." He tried to plumb Mulhavy's stare, but the man's eyes were opaque. Still, they did not seem unfriendly, as inexorably accusing as they had been before. Mulhavy was silent, plainly waiting for explanations.

Dave told of his second talk with the owner of the camera store, of the tip that had led him here to the dead woman's apartment.

Dave motioned toward the pug. "This fellow was waiting down the hall when I knocked on the door, but I've never seen him before. He claims he was June Harvey's boy friend. He let me in, and"—he hesitated—"there she was, dead. It was the first time I'd seen her, but I couldn't make this pug believe me."

The ex-fighter was looking at Phil Colby with sullen interest. Then he said bitterly, "Hell, it wasn't this other guy. It was you playin' around with my girl! It was dark the night I caught you with June——"

Phil Colby shrugged.

Mike Mulhavy said dryly, "If you want pictures here for your paper, Stafford, you'd better take them yourself. I don't think Colby works for your sheet any longer. He's the one who helped put you in this jam."

Dave got slowly to his feet. He wished someone would throw a sheet over the body on the floor. He wished he could bring back yesterday and those hundreds of earlier yesterdays of Clair's talking and Clair's laughter and Clair's close, warm presence.

He looked at Phil Colby, and Colby sneered, "You told your wife you wished she was dead, and George Maston told me he wanted your column killed. I thought this was a cinch."

So, Dave thought, *Colby had worked with Maston in building up this murder and frame!* It was a jolt. To Dave's knowledge, there had been no lost love between Colby and the politician since Maston's son had welched on a big IOU he had lost to Colby. How much had that note covered? Ten thousand dollars, Colby had claimed, and the politician had refused to pay for his son's losses.

Mike Mulhavy was saying, "Until an hour ago, Stafford, I thought you were either plenty smart or a damn big fool for claiming you had been framed. But when you handed me that infra-red lip make-up at the bus station, I remembered the camera-store manager told me George Maston had bought some. I gave you the benefit of the doubt and checked that angle.

"When I got to Maston's house, he was as crazy as a horticulturist with ants in his plants. He opened the door, recognized me, and yelled that he hadn't meant to kill her. I wasn't even sure what he was talking about. Then he slugged me and made a break for the upstairs. Before I could catch him, he got a gun in his room and shot himself. Before he died, he told the whole story. It was Colby, here, who gave Maston the idea of framing you for a faked murder."

"Faked?" Dave looked at the detective. Hope was suddenly in him, and a deep-driven fear that his hope would be futile. "You mean—you mean that Clair . . ."

"She's all right. She should be back home by now. She was blindfolded and tied up in Maston's house. All he wanted was to keep you in trouble until he was re-elected in the next week's elections."

Relief, swift and unbelievable, ran through Dave Stafford. He wanted to cry and he wanted to laugh. He wanted to go home and kiss Clair, and when his vacation came he wanted to paint the kitchen as no kitchen was ever painted before.

Mulhavy said, "Colby cooked up the plan and sold it to Maston. He rigged up his news camera for taking the infra-red picture in total darkness, and told Maston what to do. They got this June Harvey—she's got a yard-long record on the headquarters blotter for shakedowns—and her job was to put on one of your wife's dresses and play dead on the floor.

"According to Maston, he got some blood from the coroner's office to put on the floor and on the fireplace poker. They left the poker where you'd be sure to stumble over it and pick it up when you came home last night. When you came in drunk, Maston snapped his picture, and the Harvey girl slipped out of the way until you'd gone to bed. Then Colby came in, used your darkroom to develop the negative and make the enlargements that framed you."

Dave rubbed a hand across his eyes. Everything he had heard shaped into a pattern, but there was more—there *had* to be more—to it.

Mulhavy continued, "Your wife was gagged and blindfolded, and she couldn't testify who kidnaped her. Maston must have thought he'd pulled a safe, sure job against you, but the rest he told me wasn't clear. He gave Phil Colby a clean bill, but the Harvey girl must have stayed a while with Maston. I figured she tried a shakedown of her own on him. He claimed she felt sick and wanted a bromo. He got one for her, and it killed her. Only it was potassium cyanide he gave her. I found traces of it in an empty bromo bottle in his medicine cabinet."

Dave said, "Maston admitted giving her the poison?"

Mulhavy shook his head. "He died just after telling about bringing her body here." He added belligerently, "Anyhow, what more proof do you need than what killed this woman and what was in Maston's medicine cabinet? The coroner will find cyanide did this job. I know my business, Stafford!"

"You thought you knew your business when you were accusing me of murder," Dave reminded him. He rubbed the back of his hand across dry lips. He went into the kitchenette, got himself a glass, and filled it from the faucet. But he didn't drink the water. He found the salt shaker he wanted, and looked at it grimly. His eyes were hard, and his mouth was hard.

He returned to the living room and looked at the body on the floor. Whatever June Harvey had been in life, hard and grasping, death had softened the lines of her face. She lay, Dave noticed, in much the same position she had taken when she had helped fake Clair's death. The brown coloring of infra-red make-up had been removed from her shoulder, but a small dark stain still showed. Looking at this, Dave remembered the picture she had posed for, the fears and doubts and terrors she had helped give him. But she had not been alone in this. There had been others, George Maston and Phil Colby.

Dave looked up at Colby. "I ought to beat all hell out of you," he said with slow, even hatred. "But you'll pay your price when you go to the chair for murder!"

Colby's mouth tightened, and a faint streak of gray came across each cheekbone, but that was all the change of expression he showed.

Mulhavy blurted out, "Stafford, what the hell!"

Dave said, "George Maston framed me, and we know that, but Phil Colby framed Maston. Here's your murderer, Mikel!"

Colby sneered, "What are you trying to do, Stafford—manufacture yourself a column?"

Mulhavy growled, "Now don't start giving out with any smart theorizing." But he was intent. He was listening.

Dave said, "It was easy for Colby to frame Maston, because Maston knew nothing about photography. Maston ordered the infra-red supplies Colby said they'd need, and paid for them with his check, not knowing, as Colby knew, that such supplies are not frequently bought and would certainly be traced back to him. Which was what Colby wanted."

Phil Colby said mockingly, "Now, don't you sound cute!"

Dave went on, "Colby tipped June Harvey off to play sick and ask for a bromo while she was alone with Maston. He told her if she worked it right, she could squeeze a lot of money out of Maston. But Maston didn't know the 'bromo' he brought her was really poison Colby had planted in the bottle. Sure, Colby did that! Potassium cyanide is a chemical—and a quick-acting poison—any photographer can buy at a camera store. It killed June Harvey, and Maston knew he was on the spot."

Dave looked at the detective. "When you went to ask Maston about the infra-red bulbs and make-up, Maston thought you were after him for the murder. He confessed killing the girl, and then shot himself. If he hadn't killed himself, he might have gone to the chair for murder. That was what Colby wanted. With George Maston dead, Maston's son would inherit, and then Colby would collect on that note for ten thousand."

Colby was silent, and now he was tense. Mike Mulhavy said, "And what do we get for proof?"

Dave shook his head. "I haven't any."

He watched mockery and relief rise in Colby's dark eyes. He said, "I'll take the camera and film holders now, Colby."

Colby shrugged. "I'll see you in a slander court, Stafford." He handed over the camera. He reached into his coat pocket, brought out two film holders.

Dave took the holders, glanced at them, and at the white granular substance caught in their corners. He looked up.

"This white stuff, Colby," he said. "Some of it must have been spilled loose in your pocket with the film holders. What is it—part of the potassium cyanide you put in that bromo bottle?"

For a moment the man stood rigid, the sheen of falseness in his eyes changing to sudden panic. Then he broke for the door. Mike Mulhavy yelled, reached for his gun. Dave threw the camera. It was a good camera, and a heavy one, but it was worthless after it and the man it struck hit the floor.

Dave said, "George Maston framed me, and Colby framed Maston, so I just framed Colby. It wasn't cyanide on the film

holders, only some table salt I got in the kitchen. Mike, if it takes a rubber hose to get a full confession out of him, I won't care."

When he got home the lights were on, and Clair was waiting at the door. They had their soft words, and made their promises that never again would they ever argue.

But much later that night Dave sat up suddenly in bed, his mind pierced by a single sharp question.

"Clair!" he said.

"What?"

"That infra-red make-up on the Harvey girl's shoulder was in exactly the right place! How did Phil Colby know about that birthmark?"

Clair's voice was drowsy with sleep. "What did you say, darling?"

Dave Stafford reconsidered. "Nothing," he said. "Nothing at all, dear."

The Booby Trap

The booby trap into which Sam Newton was thrown at the Forty-Nine Club was loaded with a corpse at one end and the electric chair at the other. Quite a potent charge to set for one only recently back from the hell of the battlefronts! . . . Henry Norton achieved recognition with the better detective-fiction magazines only after years of laborious climbing of the termite-ridden editorial ladder; this recognition is more than justified, as can be seen in this story.

SAM NEWTON was standing alone at the bar when the tiny blonde came in, and if she wasn't looking for a pickup, then twenty months in the South Pacific had dulled Sam's finer predatory instincts. He decided that much from her brief pause at the door as she came into the almost empty cocktail lounge, the slow appraisal in her glance, lingering on him just a fraction longer than necessary, from the way she walked over toward a table, with a slow, even gait that accentuated the positive and went a long way toward eliminating the negative.

Sam beckoned to Russ, the barman. "Whose is it?"

Russ did a quick take from under heavy black eyebrows, and his lips shaped a soundless whistle. "Never had the pleasure," he said.

"Gimme a napkin," Sam Newton muttered.

The barman pushed a white, folded napkin across the bar and grinned. "Remember, we split the tip," he said. "If it's anything you can divide by two."

Sam winked, composed his face decorously, and draped the

napkin across his arm. He went over to the table in the far corner where the girl was settling herself. The close-up picture was every bit as good as his first impression. A clear, smooth skin, nicely modeled features, and eyes with their own lashes and shadow.

"May I serve madam?" Sam said.

She looked up at him coolly. "I came in here for a zombi," she told him. "But I didn't expect one with a serviette on its arm."

He took it manfully. "One zombi—yes, madam."

He went back to the bar and ordered the drink, then paid for it from the slim roll of bills in his pocket. Russ set the drink on a tray, rang up a dollar, and returned four ones to Sam Newton.

"Should be a buck eighty," Russ murmured, "but I can go along with a gag."

Sam put the tall glass down carefully in front of the girl. "Compliments of the management of Chez Henri," he told her.

She tried to look cold, but her eyes twinkled.

"Aren't you a little confused?" she inquired. "This happens to be the Golden Pheasant. Chez Henri is in the next block."

"I run between the two," Sam explained. "It's the manpower shortage. But perhaps madam would not be aware of a manpower shortage?"

"Now that you mention it," she said, and laughed. It was a nice laugh, warm and lively. She tilted her head to one side and looked at him. "You're no waiter. I saw you on the receiving side of the bar as I came in. Besides, your dress shirt is clean."

Sam grinned.

"Well," she said finally, "you did buy me a drink. That entitles you to some small talk and five points toward your junior wolf badge. So bring your glass and sit down."

Her name, it developed, was Helen Odell, and she stood perfectly still for a living, while men took pictures of her wearing the latest hats or the smartest frocks or being kissed because she used the right soap. She made it clear, in reply to Sam's

delicate probing, that the people who manufacture bathing suits and the more intimate feminine apparel could get along without her aid or not at all.

"Awful waste of raw material," Sam groaned. "Don't you know there's a war on?"

The girl impressed him—that he had to admit. She was properly casual about his medical discharge, waiting for him to take the lead in talking about it, interested, but not curious. She had ideas, too, about books and plays and the radio. Her likes were generally reasonable, and reasonably general. Sam found himself wondering, feeling a vague regret that he hadn't met her more conventionally. But then, he reasoned, she could probably tell he wasn't the type who went around picking up babes in cocktail bars.

The nagging self-answer to that was, "You just did!"

He asked, "Are you an habitu   of this place?"

Helen Odell said, "Watch your language, sir!"

Sam grinned. "I just wondered if you might know that suit of long underwear that just walked in. He seems to be giving you the office, but plenty."

She glanced around cautiously. "You mean the one with the high-starched collar and the high-topped shoes?"

"And his hair piled high upon the bureau," Sam finished. "He looks a little out of place in here."

"I don't know him," she said.

"I suppose it's no novelty for you to be stared at, anyway," Sam murmured, and bent to retrieve the glove she had knocked to the floor.

"I've never learned to enjoy it," she admitted. "Well, Sam, you haven't developed such long teeth. I know a place near here where the lobster is good and the music is soft and the check is equally divisible by two. If you haven't started regretting your brashness—"

Sam slid out of his chair. "Wonderful idea," he said. "All but that about splitting the check."

She grinned at him. "You want me to pay it all?"

"If you haven't been spanked lately, or kissed," Sam growled, "you might start preparing yourself."

They walked arm in arm, like two kids in love, and Sam was thinking how nice it would be to know this girl better. She talked his language—she made the proper remarks about the screwy hats they passed in the windows, while wearing one herself. She hugged his arm close while they stared at a plate-glass windowful of impressive diamonds, and whispered, "People like to think couples are ring shopping—wouldn't do to disillusion 'em." She eyed a dress-window dummy enviously and said, "What a torso!"

"You're fishin'," Sam told her.

She smiled at him. "You're cute."

Guided by the almost imperceptible tug of her arm, they wheeled into the lobby of the Forty-Nine. It was a modern, shimmering place of gold and green, decked with supposedly pioneer murals that were themselves as modern as tomorrow's jet-propelled plane. Sam pulled back instinctively, and looked around in a sort of alarm.

"Hey, wait a minute!" he said. "This is Doc Henderson's joint!"

"So what?" asked Helen Odell.

"You know him?"

"By sight," said the girl. "We don't have to order the proprietor on toast, you know. And they do have the best lobster Newburg in town."

"Doc doesn't like my insides," Sam grumbled.

"Doc loves anybody with enough money to pay his check," Helen told him. "Besides, he's got a boy in the Pacific, Sam. He's partial to service men."

"Like a spider is partial to flies," said Sam.

But he went in, thinking that twenty months of absence might have taken the edge off his feud with Doc Henderson. Although, at the time, it had been a hot enough scrap to evoke some pretty violent deeds on both sides.

It had started when Sam Newton was reporting for the

Times Bulletin. Angered at the clipping a few of his Army friends had taken at Henderson's club, Sam had done a series of articles taking the hide off night life in general and the Forty-Nine Club in particular. It had thrown but a temporary crimp in Doc's business. Its worst result from the night club man's viewpoint was that it had brought a swarm of OPA and liquor tax men around his ears and cost him plenty for violations.

Henderson hadn't taken it lying down—he wasn't that kind. He had come up through the ranks, peddling drugstore booze during prohibition to earn his nickname, going from that to shilling for the town's big gamblers, and ending, finally, in possession of one of the town's fancier traps. He owned protection everywhere but from the government men who had shaken him down, and nothing was ever done about the neat shellacking Sam Newton took in a dark street from Bart Cummings and two other of Doc's boys a few nights after the blowup.

Still, that was almost two years ago, Sam thought, *and nobody stays mad forever*. He surrendered his hat and coat to a red-haired bandit in a low-cut green evening dress, and followed a solemn waiter to a table crowded far back toward the rear entrance.

"On a clear day you can see the floor show," Sam told the girl. "Maybe they could set us up a table in the kitchen and let us eat with the help."

"What do you expect, with no reservations?" Helen scolded. "Besides, we came here to eat, remember?"

"A small display of cuticle wouldn't ruin my appetite," Sam told her. "I'm just back from the wars. My morale still needs rebuilding."

"Disgusting," she told him cheerfully.

The lobster was delicious, but Sam Newton didn't get to enjoy much of it. They had just sampled their orders, and Sam was beginning a very funny story about a bomb-deafened Marine on Saipan who was ordered to establish contact with an advance unit. It was then he heard the shots—two dull ex-

plosions, through the closed door behind them. He stopped talking and sat up straight.

"Did you hear that?" he said. "Shots!"

"Probably a truck backfire in the alley."

Sam told her, "I've heard enough shots in the last two years so I wouldn't go overboard on a backfire, sis. You sit here a minute—I'll be right back."

"Wait, Sam!"

But he was gone, swift, soft-footed, back toward the paneled door behind their table. No one around them had looked up. He and the girl were possibly the only ones who had heard the sounds. He had one glimpse of Helen Odell, sitting white-faced and suddenly scared at their table; then he was through the door.

The door went solidly shut behind him. He stood in a long, wide hall with doors opening on one side, and a flight of stairs going up about midway on the other. At the end of the passage was a larger door that might lead to the outside. The hall was dimly lighted, but there was enough light for Sam to see at once the black revolver that lay at the foot of the stairs.

The whole thing fairly shouted, "Booby trap!" and Sam moved forward on the balls of his feet. He saw now that the light was coming from the stairway. *What a spot*, he thought, *for a sitting duck!* If he moved in to pick up the black gun, he'd be bear meat for anyone on the steps. *Turn around, Sam*, his mind told him. *It isn't your party. . . . Walk out on it! Go back to the blonde!*

And it was thinking that way that decided him—the sudden realization that if he hadn't picked up with a stray blonde, patently on the prowl, he wouldn't have been at the proper spot at the proper time to hear those two shots, and would not now be standing with his eyes fixed on a shining black gun in his enemy's house. *Go back to the blonde, indeed! What makes you think she'd let you come back, Sam? She's part of the game!*

He eased along the wall, every sense alert. There was a

glass door in the hall opposite the stairs. By lowering his head, he could see the reflection of the steps, and they were vacant. One long step took him to the revolver. He bent to study it. He could see the dull glint of lead in the two compartments uppermost. It was loaded. It was a weapon, if he needed one.

At the head of the steps, the door swung open. A man stood there, looking down. He said, "By God, it's Sam Newton! So you came back for more, did you, smart boy?"

Doc Henderson hadn't changed in looks in two years. He had the same shiny skull, the same pinched mouth and sharp, predatory nose, the same dull eyes half hidden under cavernous brows. He saw the gun at Newton's feet, and one hand whipped to his shoulder.

"Don't try for it!" he shouted. "Don't—"

A gun slammed, close to Sam's ear, so close that flecks of powder stung the side of his face. He went for the gun with a swift clawing motion and jumped aside in time to see the glass door swing shut. A thin wreath of gray gunsmoke eddied in the tiny draft the door's closing made, and the acrid reek of cordite brought crowding memories of the days and nights on Biak, on Saipan, on Guam.

He looked up then, in time to see Doc Henderson fall. Doc came down slowly, bending first at the knees, and then pitching forward to roll down the steps to Sam's feet. He tumbled onto his back, with the baleful eyes still open and staring. But where the nose had been was now a red-smeared orifice that belonged on no living face.

Sam wasted no time on Henderson. He stiff-armed the swinging door, and went through it while it was still crashing back against the wall. He jumped into darkness, another hall, unlighted. He raced for the other end of the passage, banged through another swinging door, and stopped, blinking at the sudden light.

He was in the brightly lighted kitchen, and there were half a dozen persons converging on him. He recognized Bart Cum-

mings, square-jawed and truculent as ever, with the red scar down his blue-black cheek. The others he did not know, but Bart Cummings held an automatic at the ready, and two of the white-clad cooks carried cleavers.

There was no chance now. Sam dropped the gun and spread-eagled his arms against the door behind him. They crowded in, and Cummings said sharply, "Nobody touch that rod!" Then he grinned raggedly at Sam Newton.

"Long time no see, sucker!" he said.

He smashed at the side of Sam's head with the barrel of the gun. Sam took the blow on an agile forearm, and clipped Cummings across the bridge of his nose with the edge of his open hand. There was a satisfactory crunch, and Sam's foot was launching a finisher at Cummings as his right hand took hold of the nearest cook's wrist. Then the door behind him exploded against his back, and as he went forward, the other cook caught him back of the ear with the dull edge of a cleaver. Sam kept on going forward, and down into blackness.

He awoke on his back on the kitchen floor, and the first sobbing breath of returning consciousness told him he hadn't been too gently handled while he was out. There was a tearing pain in his side that could be caved in; there was the salt taste of blood in his mouth that meant his face had been worked over. He looked up, wincing as the bright ceiling lights hit his eyes.

Sergeant Kendall of Homicide bent over and said, "Hello, Sam. I'm sorry to find you here. What in hell got into you, man?"

Sam grinned hazily. "Don't crowd me, Sarge."

"Oh, hell!" said Kendall. "Don't tell me you expect to get away with it! Walk into a man's place and blow him apart, and then tell me not to crowd you!"

Sam got it then, all of it, and it did nothing to relieve the savage aching of his head. They'd really got him this time! Somebody wanted Henderson dead, so they put a little blonde fluff on the line for bait and lined Sam right up on time, finger-

prints on the gun and everything. It was pretty, but it looked fatal, too.

"Did you hear about the hillbilly who bought the city house?" he asked Kendall. "The foot bath in the bathroom had two lids on it. They used one for a bread board, and the other one to frame grandpa's picture. But, brother, never a frame like this one!"

"Frame, he says!" snarled Bart Cummings. "We hear the shots, an' this gunsel comes runnin' into the kitchen wavin' a gun. We have a little trouble quietin' him down, an' then we go an' find Doc shot to dog food!"

Sam noticed with pleasure that Bart's nose was taped and his eyes were bloodshot. "Shut your eyes, Bart," he said dreamily, "before you bleed to death!"

Kendall told him, "I've got to take you in, Sam."

"Do me a favor, Sarge," Sam said. "I was having some lobster with a cute little blonde, at the table just by the rear door. Find her and ask her if we didn't hear a couple of shots while I was still at the table."

A middle-aged man in an immaculate dinner coat said, "Pardon me, sir, but I was waiting on this gentleman at dinner. He ordered lobster, that's true. But he was absolutely alone at the table!"

Sam got himself sprung after a bit, though it took a lot of fast talking with Hymie Rubin to do it. Hymie finally went down into his greasy, king-size wallet for ten G-notes, and he was clutching Sam's arm as they came out of the hall of justice.

"You wouldn't run out, would you now, Sam?" Hymie was saying pleadingly. "You ain't gonna try anything, are you, pallie? You wouldn't do that to Hymie?"

"Don't worry," Sam told him. "My side of the story was the straight of it, Hymie."

"Hey, then," Hymie cried in fresh alarm, "don't let them throw you in the river if they knock you off. Make 'em do it where the body can be recovered!"

Sam Newton laughed and slapped the thin little bondsman's shoulder. "Quit worrying," he said. "You wouldn't know a cute little blonde, would you, Hymie? Name of Odell; works for the Bannerman Model Agency?"

Hymie groaned. "At a time like this, blondes he wants! I wouldn't, kid, but I once bailed out Mr. Bannerman on a small matter which would positively wreck his business if the truth got out. Would that help?"

Sam said, "Would it ever!"

He got a second shock at the Bristol Arms, where the fabulous John Bannerman maintained his bachelor apartment. A smiling Filipino opened the door for him, and Sam went into a glacially lovely room of blue-upholstered walls and ivory furniture to stand face to face with the high-collared gent he'd seen at the Golden Pheasant. The man's face was politely blank.

"You wanted to see me?"

"That I did," Sam answered heartily. "You see, I've just been arrested for murder, and——"

The man said, "José!" in a strangled voice.

"Relax," Sam told him. "It's a bum pitch all the way, and all I need to prove it is to get in touch with Miss Odell. So I thought——"

Puzzled, Bannerman said, "Odell?"

"You know, the little blonde," Sam answered. "Helen Odell. Does all the stuff with clothes on."

"Sorry," said Bannerman stiffly.

"So'm I," Sam agreed. "She ought to be something special in a— What? You mean you don't know her?"

"That's exactly right," said Bannerman. "I never heard of her. Now, if you'll excuse me——"

"Wait a minute!" Sam told him grimly. An unpleasant smile split his face, so that he looked like a malevolent oriental god. He took one quick stride and bunched the man's precise lapels into a hard knot beneath the high, stiff collar.

Bannerman called, "José!"

"You'd better think again," Sam said. "I saw you at the Golden Pheasant a minute before she hauled me over to Doc's. She signaled by dropping her glove that I was on the hook, didn't she? Where do you come into the picture, fancy pants? Start talking, or—"

Gentle hands took hold of Sam's wrist, hands so caressing he had no warning of disaster. They turned to steel against his strength, and he felt himself spun backward, up, and over a lithe back, to land sprawling in a corner of the room. José grinned at him pleasantly.

"Judo," he said. "Very nice to know."

"I'll bet," Sam answered dizzily, struggling to his feet. The Filipino stood a few feet from him, alert and watchful. Sam peered at John Bannerman.

"You gonna talk?" he demanded.

Bannerman said, "Get out, or I'll call the police."

Sam Newton took a lurching step forward, and José darted in to take an arm in both his small brown hands. Sam yielded to the pressure. He fell backward, and brought the little brown man across his drawn-up feet. At the bottom of his fall he kicked both legs straight, and José went sailing through the air for twenty feet, to crash against a bookcase and lie still. Sam stood up, dusting his hands.

"Judo," he said. "Very nice. Care to try it?"

"Go away," Bannerman said faintly.

"Not till you talk," Sam told him. "Not till you tell me who rigged the frame. Who killed Henderson? Who steered the babe onto me at the Pheasant? Where do I find her? Where do you fit into the deal? Come on, talk!"

The man's jaws worked convulsively. "Bart Cummings!" he croaked. "He's been wanting to take over Doc's place for a long time. When you came back he had a fall guy made to order. All I did was catch the signal and phone 'em you were coming. Odell's Bart's girl—she'd do anything for him!"

Sam Newton nodded grimly. He wanted to smash this white-faced old geezer in the face, but every bit of sense in him told

him this was the straight story. It added up and made sense, and nothing else did.

He said, "You got to tell that to the law."

"I'll do anything," Bannerman quavered. "Anything to stop this madness and killing and crime. Call the police—I'll talk to them!"

"You're darned right you will," Sam said.

He crossed to the ivory phone on the kidney-shaped desk with the blue leather top. He dialed, and in the midst of his dialing, turned to see if José was still in his corner. The thought was late by seconds only, for he had a glimpse of the little man streaking behind him an instant before José's fist chopped into the nerve center behind the ear. This time Sam fell on his back. *Just so I won't get in a rut*, he thought dreamily, as his senses faded.

Bannerman was doing a very nervous job of holding an automatic pointed at Sam when the latter opened his eyes. The ex-Marine sat up and rubbed the knot behind his ear with an expression of disgust.

"Haven't you guys got any imagination?" he asked sourly. "You could at least hit me behind the other ear."

"I advise you to sit very quietly," said Bannerman. "I shall not hesitate to use this gun."

"What are we waiting for?" Sam asked.

Bannerman hesitated. "José has gone for the police."

Sam answered, "Nuts! I was calling the police. If cops were all you wanted, you didn't need to slug me."

"Sit still or I'll shoot," Bannerman said.

Sam looked at the gun in the man's nervous hand. The safety was off. It was ready to fire, and even a rank amateur couldn't miss all eight shots at this range. But then, what the hell? It was worth a try.

"Lot of shooting you'd do with that rod," he jeered. "You got the safety on. You have to push it up before you can fire the gun."

Bannerman flushed, said, "But I thought—"

Sam yawned and stretched. "Okay. Leave it the way it is. But you'll sure get the bird when your playmates see how you've been holding a gun on me."

The flustered Bannerman shoved the safety catch on, and Sam jumped him. Bannerman tugged frantically at the unyielding trigger for a second, and then, snarling his hate, hurled the gun at Sam's head. Sam ducked, and tangling his fingers in the man's coat front, let go a left hand that exploded on Bannerman's chin like a bazooka.

"Sweet dreams, fancy pants," he said.

His quick fingers prowled the unconscious Bannerman's pockets. He found what he wanted in the pin-seal wallet. There was close to seven thousand dollars in large bills. Those he left. There was an IOU signed by Merwin T. Henderson. That he took. There was a plain white card that read, "Laguna Vista Apartments, No. 107." This he grabbed in feverish haste, and left the apartment with Mr. John Bannerman snoring unpleasantly on the leather davenport.

The Laguna Vista he found to be about seven blocks downtown, and he smiled at a string of imitation red peppers on the patio entrance. "Laguna Vista," he told a cold white moon, "is supposed to mean lake view, and the only view of a lake this joint would ever have would be if Veronica happened to walk by."

He found the number he wanted, and knocked softly at the door. He had to knock a number of times before a light came on and he heard someone come to the door.

"Who is it?" It was Helen's voice.

"José," Sam hissed. "Message from Mr. Bannerman."

The door grudging open a crack, and Sam set his shoulder to it solidly and sent it flying wide. He had a glimpse of Helen Odell in a filmy nightgown that should have been in somebody's hope chest. She gasped, turned, and ran back to the bed.

"Get out of here!" she said angrily, clutching a coverlet around her. "What gave you the idea you could come barging in here this time of night?"

His mouth pulled into a crescent of disdain. "Don't worry, sis," he told her. "All I want from you is conversation, and fast. You can keep right on being Bart Cummings' babe, for all of me."

"Bart Cummings!" she gasped. "Are you crazy?"

"I am, or Bannerman is," Sam said sourly. "He said that was why you sucked me into that murder trap—because you'd do anything for Bart."

Her cheeks flamed and she jumped out of bed, forgetting the coverlet. "Oh, that liar!" she cried. "I'm not Bart Cummings' girl, and never was. And another thing, you—did you say *murder*?" she ended weakly.

"Nice act," Sam Newton said judicially. "I don't feel so bad now about missing the floor show. I suppose you didn't know Henderson was shot tonight."

She was silent for so long that Sam's mouth was open to ask her again. Then she spoke slowly, and with a voice that shook. "I've been such a dope," she said. "Sam, I didn't know it was that. Please believe me. I needed a job. Bannerman said if I'd do that business of getting you to the Forty-Nine, he'd give me one. He said you and Henderson had fought in the past, but Henderson wanted to make it up to you. That's what I thought it was. Honest, Sam, that's what I thought."

"Not good enough," he told her harshly. "Not when they drop a murder frame over me; not when I'm looking at the electric chair! How come you took a powder? The waiter swears I was there alone!"

Her eyes did not leave his face. "The waiter told me you were talking to Henderson," she said, steadily now. "He said he'd give you my number if you asked about me. I came home, and you didn't call."

"No, I didn't call," Sam answered somberly. "Want to know why? Because I was in jail, charged with murder! You don't call blondes from the city jug, even if they are cute and easy to pick up!"

"Oh, go to hell, Sam Newton!" she flared. "I'm not easy to

pick up. I was only trying to earn a job, and I'd have—"

"Forget it," Sam advised. "Put your clothes on—the ones you wear to fights. We're going down to the Forty-Nine and find Bart Cummings."

"You think I'm afraid to?" she said. "Turn your back while I get dressed."

"And get clipped again?" Sam demanded cynically. "The hell I will, sweetheart. Dress in the bathroom!"

He phoned while she dressed, and finally roused Sergeant Kendall. The date he made was for fifteen minutes later at the Forty-Nine, and he was just hanging up as Helen came out of the bathroom ready to go.

"Nice going," he said, and his eyes stored up the memory of her trimness, and the resolute lines of her jaw. "You're cute. I hope I'm wrong about you."

They walked briskly. They were passing the Chez Henri when Helen murmured, "Don't look now, but I think we're leading a parade."

It didn't take long to verify that. José was on their trail, small and agile, making use of the occasional loiterer as cover, and keeping an even half-block behind them. It took them longer to spot Bannerman, for he kept to the other side of the street and did not close in until they were within a block and a half of the Forty-Nine. Then Bannerman and José both moved up, until no more than a few yards were between them and the couple they trailed.

"Dark block ahead," Sam said. "Cross your fingers."

The window lights were mostly out, and the crowds had thinned till now there were only a few scattered people on the street. The dark block ahead looked miles long, and behind them came the steady plod of footsteps, keeping pace. Then Helen gasped, and pointed.

Bart Cummings walked between two others, coming toward them. There was no escape. They were trapped, Sam knew, and as if to verify his knowledge, a car turned the corner behind them and came slowly crawling along the curb.

"It's no good," Sam said. He caught the girl's arm and pulled her to a stop in front of the jewelry store. "Maybe they'll give us time for a quick honeymoon," he said.

"You fool," she murmured, and squeezed his arm.

Sam balled his hat around his fist and shoved it against one of the small panes of glass. Then he turned to face the men who closed in from all sides.

"Get in the car," Bart growled.

"Wait a minute," Sam said. "How about the girl here? What happens to her?"

"This the finger you hired?" Bart asked.

"It is," said John Bannerman precisely. "I'm afraid she'd better go with Newton. If they've had a chance to talk, she probably knows too much."

"Knows maybe that you're the big brains behind the deal?" asked Sam. "Knows maybe that you held an IOU over Doc for enough to take over his joint if he got knocked? And knows you've been making your models work at the Forty-Nine, putting the clip on the customers, in order to hold their jobs? What a louse you are, Bannerman!"

"Get in the car," said Bannerman.

"The old one-way ride is back in style again, honey," Sam told Helen. "Mind if I tell you you're the ten people I'd rather be killed with?"

"Check, mister," she said. He kissed her.

"Hurry, you——"

The night split wide open then, in the wail of sirens and the sudden lights of half a dozen wheeling cars with the jewelry-store front as their focus. A flood of blue-clad figures washed down so suddenly that Bannerman and his men could not make a move.

"I'm cute, too," Sam boasted. "I know about burglar alarms on jewelers' windows, and everything."

"Who was it actually cooled Henderson?" demanded Kendall. He'd got there too late for the arrest, and he was feeling left out of things.

"Cummings, through the kitchen entrance," said Sam. "He fired the first two shots so I'd go back for a look-see, and Henderson would open his door. Then he blasted Doc and slipped back to the kitchen. You won't go wrong pinching any of the help at the Forty-Nine, but Bannerman's the real criminal. Nail him to the cross, Sarge."

He linked his arm through Helen's. "Let's go back and look at that jeweler's window," he said. "It's beginning to give me ideas!"

Slightly Perfect

Norman A. Daniels realized his first writing successes in the sports field, turning his talents to the detective story only after a period of several years. This early experience gave him a style not generally achieved by the detective writer anchored to the same field from the beginning of his key-pounding days. The simple, direct sentences, and the lack of complex punctuation give this story a staccato quality not ordinarily encountered.

ONLY one little thing worried Dr. Barton Kent. They hadn't buried her. It had rained for three whole days and nights, so that digging a grave was impossible. The body had been placed in the cemetery crypt.

That could be dangerous for him.

He was glad the business was over with. He still had a certain unpleasantness to face, but the funeral was the first and most difficult hurdle. He had been compelled to trust his own judgment that the woman in the coffin looked enough like his wife to pass as her corpse.

"She was so very, very ill," he explained to those who commented about her appearance. And they accepted his word. Every last one of them.

And it was done now. The completely perfect crime. Fool-proof—absolutely. People had watched her die; he had called in other doctors, saying that he didn't feel capable of treating his own wife. The cause of death was pneumonia. There could be no question about it. It *had* been pneumonia. But the patient hadn't been Dr. Kent's wife.

Dr. Kent entered the huge old house and nodded to old Peterson, who was an example of Cora's cheapnesses. A house-keeper couldn't drive the car, chop kindling, act as gardener, and also farm the two acres out in back. Peterson could, though, and cleaned the house, too. Besides, he was a good cook—and never asked for more money.

Dr. Kent entered the very spacious living room and he felt like cheering. It was all his now. He no longer needed Cora to hand him a few dollars. All the money and land she'd accumulated was his. He could travel, drink, and gamble. After a decent interval, of course. He had to be very careful.

The room was heavy with the odor of funeral flowers; he threw up two of the rear windows. He stood there, breathing the fresh air and looking out over the grounds he now owned. He smiled thinly. A man could get away with murder if he used his head. Of course, there was a certain matter to be disposed of now, but that was easy.

Someone stepped behind him and Kent whirled, his face turning ashen. Then he scowled. It was only Peterson, bent with age, soft blue eyes as impassive as ever. He held a framed portrait of Kent's wife in his hand. He walked over to the mantel and placed it there, precisely in the center.

"I thought you might like that," Peterson said. "To sort of remind you—of her."

"Yes," Kent said. "Yes, of course. Thank you, Peterson. By the way, are you staying on with me now that Miss Cora is gone?"

"If I may, sir. I've always liked it here. I'll do my best."

"You can stay," Kent said, "only don't creep up behind me and frighten me half to death. And, Peterson—did you think Miss Cora had changed much?"

Peterson's gray head bobbed up and down. "She *had* changed, sir. A great deal, but then she was so terribly sick. You had to look hard to see the beauty she once had."

Kent sighed. "I suppose so. People commented about it, but of course I'd been with her so much that I didn't notice. Incidentally, Peterson, you may take all her clothes—everything

except jewelry—and bring them all home to your wife. I'm sure she can use the things."

Peterson looked amazed. "Oh, thank you, sir. There is so much. My wife will be very grateful. I'll take care of it after I finish my work today."

"Do it now," Kent said curtly. "There are suitcases in the attic. Fill them up. Take my car—just get her things out of the house as quickly as possible. Oh, Peterson—you haven't been able to do much in the garden these last few days, have you?"

"No, sir, it's been raining too hard. But I'll get after it soon as the ground dries off. I'll work as hard for you as I did for her, sir."

"Yes," Kent said, "I'm sure you will. That's all for now."

Peterson didn't leave. He stood there with those very blue eyes appraising the new master of the house.

"Well?" Kent asked. "What is it?"

"I was just thinking, sir. Miss Cora wasn't, shall we say, overly generous about the matter of my salary. I was wondering if you might . . . It's so hard to live nowadays with only a small income like mine, and I hoped . . ."

"We'll take it up later," Kent answered.

"Thank you, sir," Peterson said, smiling. "I was sure you'd see it my way. I'll go to work right away removing her things. Thank you again."

After he left, Kent scowled. What had the old fool meant by insinuating that Kent would see things "his way"? Did he know something? Kent hurled a cigarette stub into the fireplace. Of course Peterson knew nothing. He believed it had been Cora who lay dying in her room upstairs. He believed it had been Cora who had been removed to the cemetery only an hour ago. The old man had wept so hard and so sincerely that he made Kent weep a bit too—just enough to look convincing.

Kent lit another cigarette and wished the smell of the flowers would clear away. The cigarette soothed him and he relaxed. After all, what was there to worry about? He was perfectly safe. Or was he? His mind went back, covering every minute detail of

what had happened. Looking for loopholes, scraps of clues, an unwise word here or there. He was sure nothing like that existed. Fate was his partner in this little game, and a good partner, too, because Fate didn't have to be paid off.

Dr. Kent had married Cora Hicks three years ago, shortly after he had finished his internship and gone into practice in this small town. He had attended her several times and knew he had made an impression.

He found out that she was a very wealthy woman. Not a beautiful woman by any means; her face was too thin and long, her hair too stringy. She was eight years older than Kent, but her bank account more than made up for all deficiencies.

Kent's main fault was laziness. He had gone through medical school on sheer will power, planning to find and marry a woman some day who had money—and who wouldn't live long! Cora filled the bill neatly, but then she disappointed him. She didn't die. In fact, she thrived on marriage. Kent discovered he had been tricked. Cora wanted to be married, true, but she also wanted the money a good doctor could make. Cora was, unmistakably, finally, a miser.

She took charge of his calls, answered his telephone, and collected the bills. If a patient was slow, she would visit him and talk softly of how hard it was for a doctor to live. She was paid, invariably, because she had so much influence at the bank that people didn't care to cross her. And this money went into her account, not Kent's. She even begrudged turning over to him enough cash to buy proper equipment.

"Work hard while you are young and able," she would tell Kent. "When we get old, we can live comfortably and be afraid of nothing."

Kent didn't want to think about becoming old. He wanted to live now. He liked horse racing, champagne, night clubs, and blondes. That required money—lots of money. And he was not going to have it so long as Cora lived.

The determination to kill her had been born only four or five months after their marriage. But Kent was a careful man. He had bided his time, hoping against hope that she might sicken and die, but sheer obstinacy, if nothing else, made her one of the healthiest women Kent had ever seen.

They were at a party for Mr. and Mrs. Crawford the night Kent found his chance. There had been a call for him to visit a sick child. Cora had, of course, insisted that he go at once, but in back of her mind was no sympathy for any sick child. Only the five dollars the call would bring.

Kent went, half glad to get away from the dull party. The punch was so watered a man would have to drink ten gallons before he would feel the slightest buzz.

The child wasn't very sick. Kent made her comfortable, assured her parents everything would be all right, and then started driving back to the party to pick up Cora.

It had been raining that night, the first of the real rainy season. And it was cold, too, unseasonably cold for this time of year. Spring was going to be very late.

The headlights of his car swept the lonely country road and revealed the figure of a woman, staggering along, swaying as if she had had too much to drink.

Kent slowed up and stopped beside her. He opened the door. She looked at him, and he saw that her eyes were feverish. Then she simply collapsed at his feet. He picked her up and made a quick examination. The woman was extremely ill—dying, in fact. Her fever was very high.

"I—was trying to reach the village." She opened her eyes and looked up at him. He was amazed how much she looked like Cora then. "I—live all alone on the Bradford place. Bought it a month ago. I've been sick ever since I arrived, and no one has been near me to help. Are you a doctor?"

"Yes—Dr. Kent, from the village," he told her. "I'm going to give you a couple of pills. They'll make you sleep. I'll take you to my home, if you don't mind. There is no hospital, and you need care immediately."

"Thank you, Doctor," she said. "I haven't much money, but I'll pay all I can. I—I feel so terribly weak. . . ."

"Of course you do," Kent said. A wild scheme was taking shape in his mind. He looked in the back of the car. Cora's old cloak was back there where she had left it. Kent spilled a couple of pills into his hand and gave them to the woman. She smiled her thanks, and again Kent was startled at the close resemblance to Cora.

The plan seemed less wild.

This woman, he knew very well, was going to die. She had pneumonia and was too far gone for anything—sulfa drugs, serums, or oxygen. She might hang on for two or three days at most.

Kent did not start the car until she was asleep. Then he placed Cora's cloak about her, rearranged her hair to resemble the way Cora wore hers—severely parted in the middle and plastered tight against her head. This woman's hair was exactly the same color and just about as stringy. There might be minor discrepancies in appearance, but in bed, ill and dying, the resemblance would be startling.

Kent sat there a few minutes, planning carefully. He couldn't miss. The trouble with wife killers was that they were such logical suspects when the wife disappeared! Poison wouldn't work—it rarely did. Tricks like accidental asphyxiation, being struck by a car, or a fall down stairs, were equally precarious. The killer was always found out.

But if Dr. Kent's wife was brought home very ill, if she lingered a couple of days in a coma, and her friends came to visit her and other doctors treated her, then Kent would never be suspected. This woman could die as Cora, be buried in her grave. She was dying anyway. She wasn't known in the region, apparently, and bore that lucky, uncanny resemblance to Cora.

Kent started the car and drove home. Of course, Cora had to be disposed of, but that was easy. He didn't care how he killed her. He could bury her right on the estate. Who would know

the difference? Who would look for a corpse when the dead person had been decently buried?

The woman was already passing into a coma as Kent carried her into the house. Old Peterson was there, and he expressed his alarm. Kent told him to stay downstairs. He carried the woman to Cora's room and put her to bed. He made a rigid and thorough examination then, satisfying himself that she couldn't possibly live.

Then he went downstairs and summoned Peterson. "Miss Cora," he said, "is ill. She collapsed at the party. Kept going on her nerve, I think. I'm afraid she has pneumonia. Don't go upstairs. She's sleeping, and I don't want her disturbed. Nothing to worry about at the moment, Peterson. I've got another call to make. May take me some time."

"Yes, sir," Peterson said. "I won't disturb her, but I won't go home either until you return."

Kent was on the verge of ordering the old man to go home, but thought better of it. There must be absolutely nothing unusual on this, of all nights. He nodded at the old servant and hurried back to his car. The woman had passed Peterson's cursory inspection. Wrapped in Cora's cloak, her features had been partially hidden; but Peterson saw her and showed no suspicion.

When he was almost at the Crawford house, Kent stopped the car and took from his bag a vial of pills.

"You were long enough," Cora told him. "I think some of those trips ought to be paid for in time as well as effort. Did you collect anything?"

Kent handed over five one-dollar bills, and Cora slipped them into her purse. She smiled. She always smiled after money had passed into her hands.

"We'll live like a king and queen," she told him. "We'll be rich and influential. Wait and see."

"I'm sure we will," Kent told her. He meant it for himself. "Cora, you don't look very well to me. That cold you had last week—are you sure it's cleared up?"

"Of course it has," she simpered. "I feel wonderful. You don't think I look ill, do you?"

"Frankly," he said, "I do. It shows in your eyes. Bad colds always do. Before we go, you'd better have a good husky drink of punch. It's weak, but it may help."

"I'll have it now," she said, and Kent could have shouted with joy. He got the drink and managed to drop two pills into the dark liquid. They dissolved instantly. He stirred the drink thoughtfully, and then sought Cora. She drained the glass in three or four gulps.

"I was just telling Mrs. Crawford," she said, "that you don't think I look at all well. Perhaps I'd better go to bed when we get home."

Cora collapsed twenty minutes later. The drug had worked. She was alive, of course—there had been nothing dangerous about the drug, but it made her pale as paper and sent her into temporary unconsciousness.

Kent carried her to a divan, sent for his bag, and made an examination. He frowned darkly.

"She's sicker than I believed. She had a bad cold last week. You remember, of course. Cora thought it had gone, but apparently it was still with her. She's quite ill. I'll have to take her right home."

There was much sympathy, and in a few moments Kent was driving toward his home. It *would* be his in short order. He wondered just how he would kill her. An injection, perhaps. That was quick and easy. He would drive down the old lane with the headlights out. Peterson wouldn't see him nor hear the car; the old man was slightly deaf. There were tools in the little shed far behind the house. Kent would kill her, scrape a shallow grave, and bury her. Only temporarily, of course.

Later on, he would dig a real grave. Very deep. The tulip bed was the most logical place. He always planted the tulips. He could send Peterson away on some pretext or other, get the body, and carry it to the grave. He would plant the tulips over it.

Who would know the difference? Who would suspect anything? It was perfect. Flawless! Cora's estate was isolated. There were no neighbors for a mile on either side, and the land intervening was thickly wooded. Everything was made to order for Dr. Kent.

There was just one thing. After he lifted Cora from the car and placed her on the ground, she awakened just as he was ready to insert the hypo. Whether she had suspected something like this, or whether the look in Kent's eyes told her, she began to fight. Cora was strong, and in the throes of terror her strength became enormous. She thrust him away, avoided the needle, and managed to get to her feet. She uttered one scream and then began running.

They were far behind the house, possibly a third of a mile. There was no moon, no stars, and it was still drizzling, with the threat of heavier rain in the air. The ground was spongy, and the going was especially difficult for Cora in high-heeled shoes. She was dressed in white, too, which made her fairly easy to spot.

Kent went after her. Ordinarily, she wasn't fleet of foot, but knowledge of her peril gave her the speed of a deer. Equally, Kent found a reserve of strength and power somewhere. If she got away from him, everything would be lost.

Then they were close to the river bank. Not a great river, but deep and too wide to be jumped. Cora started running along it, but Kent gained faster and faster. She wasn't screaming now. The physical exertion of running for her life used all the breath she could summon. Then she tripped in the mud of the river bank. She fell, and Kent was upon her.

His hands sought her throat. Gone was the finesse of murder by injection. This called for brute force. His fingers sank into her throat and he gave a laugh of triumph. But once more she managed to wriggle free. Partly dazed, wholly overcome by terror, she didn't seem to realize which way she was going, for she leaped into the river and waded out until it was above her knees.

"If it's water you want," Kent called softly, "I'll give you your fill of it."

He got her once more. He forced her head under water and held it there until she ceased kicking. He slowly counted five more minutes, just to be positive. Then he dragged her back onto the bank. She was quite dead. He looked around for some place to hide her. A shallow grave would be all right, but he had spent too long now, in killing her.

He thought of the odd little vegetable house only a few yards down the river bank. It was simply four walls and a roof. There was no floor, and the building was raised up slightly, on stilts. Once it might have been used as some sort of drying shed, with air coming in from under the building. Nobody ever went to it, not even old Peterson.

Kent lifted the corpse and staggered under its dead weight. He made his way to the shed, opened the door, and walked in. The earthen floor was piled quite high with decaying straw. It suited his purpose precisely. He scraped a grave in the straw and deposited the corpse. Then he covered it up neatly, hurried back to his car, and drove to the main road.

A few seconds later he turned on his headlights and drove into the garage. Peterson mustn't see him soaked to the skin like this. The old man invariably spent his time in the kitchen. By moving fast, Kent could be upstairs before Peterson emerged.

It worked that way too. He went to his room and quickly changed to a suit similar to the one he had been wearing. Then he hurried into the room where the woman lay.

She was still unconscious, but he gave her two more of those pills—opiates. She wouldn't die for some time yet; the drug would be absorbed before then, and even if someone demanded an autopsy, it would make no difference.

Her pulse was thready, respiration clogged badly. The lungs were filling. He gave her less than twenty-four hours. He arranged the room lights so that only dim ones played on the big bed. He stepped back and studied the woman. He knew in his heart that if he had walked into this room unexpectedly

and saw her there, he would have believed she was Cora.

He felt like taking a few drinks, but this was no time for that. He hurried downstairs, shouting for Peterson as he went. Now came the biggest test. Peterson had seen Cora every day for years. If this woman in Cora's bed passed his inspection, then the whole thing was perfect.

"Peterson," Kent said, "go up and watch Miss Cora. She's taken a bad turn. I'm going to call in other doctors. I—I don't trust myself to take care of my own wife. A doctor shouldn't care for those he loves. She's terribly ill, Peterson."

The old man hobbled up the stairs. Kent did phone for two reputable doctors. He could fool them easily enough. They saw Cora only two or three times a year. Kent went back upstairs then. Peterson was seated beside the bed, his wrinkled old face cut in lines of deep sorrow.

"Even I can see she is very sick, Dr. Kent," he said. "You don't think she'll . . . ?"

"No," he said sternly. "No, we mustn't think of that, Peterson. The other doctors are on their way. Better make some coffee for them. I'll stay here."

So it went. The two doctors were frank about it. The woman they believed was Cora was going to die. They tried everything at their command, but it was too late. She didn't recover consciousness, but she did hang on for almost three whole days. At first it worried Kent, but then this seemed to work in his favor. Friends and neighbors came. They all looked in on her, and none doubted that it was Cora, sick and dying. Wasting away, but nevertheless still resembling Cora.

Once Kent went back to the old shed for a quick look. It was raining hard. Everything was in order, however, and he smiled in satisfaction.

Then the woman died. There was an elaborate funeral, and Kent even allowed her to lie in state. Everyone believed it was Cora.

Now he was alone in the big house, and it was time to get the unpleasantness over with. Peterson would soon be on his

way to deliver Cora's clothes to his wife. Peterson lived a long distance away, and he would be gone for hours.

Kent went upstairs and changed into some old clothes and old shoes. He was sitting on the front porch steps when Peterson came out, lugging three bulging suitcases.

"Take the rest of the day off," Kent told him. "You've worked very hard lately. While you're gone, I intend to set out those bulbs. Got to keep busy so I won't think—of her."

"That wouldn't be good," Peterson agreed—and was that a smirk on his face? "I am happy that you do not ask me to work as hard as Miss Cora did. I am sure that with the raise you promised, and with less work, we shall both be more satisfied, eh, Doctor?"

"Yes—yes, of course," Kent said. "I'm no slave driver. Run along now. By the way, the raise will make your salary eighteen dollars a week. Is that enough?"

Peterson's lips parted and he showed yellow teeth—a few of them. There were great gaps in his mouth. "We can talk of it when I return, Doctor. I'm not crazy about money, anyway."

Kent watched him drive the car away, and he frowned darkly. What had come over the old man? He acted as if . . . Kent jumped to his feet at the idea . . . as if he knew!

Kent rushed around the side of the house and in the direction of the old shed. Maybe Peterson had stumbled on the body and recognized the truth. If he had, there would be blackmail to pay. Plenty of it! Kent bit his lip in exasperation. Was this plan going to be endangered by an old man who should have died long ago anyway?

He reached the shed. From the outside, things looked perfectly normal. He opened the door and almost screamed. The thick layer of decaying straw had been moved. He kicked at it, frantically tossed it in all directions; and only when he was positive, a general weakness came over him. Cora's body had been removed!

Peterson! No doubt about it. Either he had realized the woman who died in the house was not Cora or he had acci-

dentally found the body. At any rate, it was gone. Peterson had hidden it. From now on, Kent would be in the old man's grasp. He sat down to think, idly throwing stones into the still swollen river so close by the shed.

Well, he would pay him. He would pay if Peterson didn't want too much. If the man became unbearable, the mind which had conjured up one perfect murder could think of another. That was the only answer.

Still cursing, Kent walked back to the house. No sense now in setting out the tulip bulbs. No use laboring to dig a very deep grave in the middle of the intended bed, because there wasn't any corpse. He returned to the house, changed his clothes, and drank a half dozen highballs.

He felt half sick with worry. Peterson was taking so long. It was probably the first time he had ever failed to prepare dinner.

Then he came, with that odd rolling gait of his. On those incredibly bowed legs, he entered the kitchen and smiled broadly at Kent.

"I see you have fended for yourself. That's good. I *must* have one night off a week, Doctor. My wife insists upon it. I had a talk with her this afternoon. You know, things are very expensive these days. It's true I worked for Miss Cora without much pay, and doing very hard work too. I didn't want to lose my job. But now—with such a shortage of men—I might be able to get something better."

"Why don't you, then?" Kent snapped, feeling him out.

"Oh, no. Not unless you force me to, and I don't think you will kick out an old man who has been so faithful. But my wife thinks eighteen dollars a week is too little. She says . . ."

"I'll pay you fifty," Kent said. "Will that shut your mouth?"

"Fifty?" Peterson gasped. "Fifty dollars a week? You are very kind, Doctor."

"Stay out of my way," Kent told him. "Keep your mouth shut, and there'll be fifty dollars every week."

He walked out and mixed another drink. He thought he

caught a strange look on Peterson's face, but there were so many wrinkles that he couldn't be certain. He sat down, sipping the drink slowly.

Three days went by. Peterson kept out of his way. Kent accepted no calls. He didn't have to work any more. He did it gracefully, saying the death of his wife still affected him. Soon he would go away.

Go away—and leave Peterson here? How could he? The old fool drank sometimes, and booze always loosened his tongue. Some day he might say too much.

Kent's throat felt dry. If Sheriff Gladstone suspected anything—and the sheriff was young and very able—if he opened the grave, it would be easy to prove the corpse was not that of Cora. Dental charts, for instance, would be incontestable proof. Kent groaned. He had successfully disposed of the woman who anchored him down, and now an old man had taken her place.

Kent made up his mind that Peterson had to die. He tried to figure out a way. Peterson had a bad heart—perhaps a stimulant might overtax it. Something in a cup of coffee. Peterson drank so much coffee that administering it that way would be easy. Why would anyone demand an autopsy? Kent could slip the drug into the huge cracked cup Peterson always used. A colorless, tasteless substance. Just a few drops. Peterson would fill the cup, drink, and in ten minutes he would be dead.

Kent worked carefully. He sent the old man to the drug-store for a medicine, told him to ask for it by name. It was a medicine used by chronic cardiac cases. Proof that his heart must have been acting up a bit.

Peterson left the house to go to the garage for the car. After he drove away, Kent went to his medicine bag and took out the necessary drug. He returned to the kitchen. This was going to be easy. As soon as Peterson returned, Kent would leave the house, find a couple of friends in the village, and stay with

them for a few hours. Then he would invite them to dinner. They would arrive, find Peterson on the floor, dead. Kent would call other doctors, and they would diagnose his death as due to a cardiac condition. There would be all the symptoms.

Kent rubbed his hands, got down Peterson's old cracked cup, and removed the stopper from the vial. He held the cup at eye level and poured exactly four drops of the drug into it. The smile on his face was expansive. Then it died out. The swinging door between the kitchen and the dining room was opened. Old Peterson stood there, his bleary eyes alight in horror.

He said, "I forgot the name of the medicine. . . . What are you doing with my cup? What is that stuff you put in it. What are you trying to do to me . . . ?"

There was no help for it now. Kent dropped the cup and the vial and made a dive for the old man. Peterson gave a shrill, harrowing cry. The old man was halfway across the dining room when Kent reached him. The long, sharp butcher knife from the kitchen was in Kent's hand. He jabbed it down.

Peterson stumbled and fell. Kent slashed him again and again, in a frenzy of rage. There was a lot of blood.

Kent went to the sideboard and drank from the cut-glass decanter—as much whiskey as he felt he could stand.

The old idiot, thinking he could blackmail *him!* There were ways to get rid of a corpse. As a doctor, Kent felt himself equal to the emergency. The investigation that would follow Peterson's disappearance couldn't involve him.

Unless . . . and the horror of it sank home like an arrow. Unless Peterson had left a letter telling everything. If he died violently or vanished, the envelope would be opened. Kent's desperation grew by leaps and bounds.

He decided to get out of the house. To cash in everything possible and get out of the town. There was a large bank balance, some bonds he could borrow on. All told, he might accumulate fifty thousand in cash if he worked fast. He could disappear. There was no alternative now.

He started moving rapidly toward the steps.

Brakes squealed. He ran to the front door and peered through the curtained window. His eyes grew wide, his breath came in loud gasps. Sheriff Gladstone, Jim Lane—the undertaker who had buried Cora—and Dr. Jackson were getting out of the car. They were coming for him. Peterson had talked—or Cora's body, which the old fool had hidden, must have been found!

It meant the electric chair! Kent found his lips perfectly dry, his throat constricted. This was the end. There would be days when he would be on display during the trial. He would see hundreds of accusing eyes. Listen to accusing words. They would lock him up for weeks—weeks of thinking about the chair. They would strap him into it. He couldn't stand that. Kent made a dive toward his medical kit. He unscrewed the top of a bottle and tilted it to his lips. Poison! He'd fool them. They would never make a public spectacle of him! It was a gentle drug, but thorough. Very thorough. Not even a stomach pump would work now.

He needed time, though, for the drug to take firm effect. He pushed heavy pieces of furniture against the door, and when the bell rang he laughed and continued building up his barricade. He went into the dining room where Peterson's body lay, stepped over it and picked up a chair to add to the barrier. Someone banged on a window. It was Sheriff Gladstone.

The glass crashed. Kent began to laugh, wildly. Gladstone, gun in hand, approached. The other two men came in by way of the window too. Handcuffs closed around Kent's wrists, and he still laughed. Dr. Jackson looked at the vial Kent had dropped. Then he thumbed back Kent's eyelid and shook his head slowly.

"The stuff he took is killing him already," he said. "Sheriff, what on earth happened here?"

Gladstone shrugged. "I can't figure it out. Kent must have gone out of his head. He's been acting queerly. It was his wife's death that did it, I suppose. He murdered Peterson—no question about that. And the old man was so tickled lately! He

bragged that Kent had raised his pay to fifty dollars a week. He worshiped Kent."

"Fifty a week for this old man who was just a servant?" Jim Lane asked. "Incredible!"

Gladstone nodded. "Peterson thought so too, but he wasn't going to turn away anything like that. I don't blame him. The poor old man hinted that he thought Kent had gone mad from grief. That he'd been acting queerly ever since his wife died. You know, I used to think that Kent wasn't in love with Cora. I always felt he married her for her money and got fooled. But he *must* have loved her. Peterson said he thought so, too. How is Kent?"

"He'll be gone in two or three minutes now," the doctor said. "You know, I believe he can hear us. There's an odd look in his eyes. The stuff he took brings on paralysis, but the brain is the last part to be affected. Too bad we didn't get here sooner."

Gladstone shrugged. "If he was going to go crazy, we couldn't have stopped him. Well—I guess we'll have to get another doctor to certify to the death of that woman we hauled out of the lake."

Dr. Jackson nodded, still watching Kent carefully. "I need another doctor to help me with the autopsy. It was either suicide or accidental death. There's a good chance that she may have even died a natural death near the banks of one of the streams feeding that lake. They've been badly swollen with all the rain lately. The body was probably washed into one of the streams and carried to the lake. A victim of the rain."

Sheriff Gladstone glanced into the dining room and shuddered. "Well, it's my job to find out who the woman was. Her features were too battered for any hope of recognition, but I've a hunch she was that woman who bought the Bradford place. It's been reported that she arrived at the farm and was never seen again.

"Oh, well, *that* wasn't a murder, thank heavens. You know, I'm glad Cora is dead. She liked Peterson so much. By the way, Jim—you did an excellent job on Cora. She looked natural.

Absolutely natural. I was at the wake twice. Say, Doc—how is Kent?”

“Dead,” the doctor said, rising from Kent’s body. “Dead—and there’s terror showing in his eyes even in death. He looks as if he’d just heard something horrible. Poor guy!”

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